

The Farewell

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Summary: The 2nd part of my "F" trilogy. The stress of losing Udrak takes its toll on Sarah.

The Farewell

> <meta name="Generator"> Prologue

Prologue

seven years ago....

I woke up with the most worst feeling of having to _go_ that I could remember.

I was at Girl Scout camp for two weeks. It was the fourth day - barely. I couldn't wait to go home. It was raining, and very early in the morning. I jumped out of the top bunk of the bunkbed I shared with a girl named Narissa. She snored really, _really_ loudly. In the other bunks, Valerie and Sami both talked in their sleep. Sometimes it was like they were having a weird conversation that made no sense to normal people. Right then they were just talking gibberish, though, so I ignored them. I slipped on my sandals, pulled my coat on, and, picked up my flashlight. I flicked the switch - nothing happened. I toggled it - nothing. I groaned quietly, not wanting to wake my bunkmates. I found out later that Narissa had kicked it earlier that day, and the bulb was broken. I didn't know that then, though. I put it down, not bothering to look for my spare batteries. I knew the way to the latrine. I wrinkled my nose; I could simply follow the smell.

I left the leaky, mold-smelling tent that stood on a wooden frames - birdhouses, they called them. My tent called them "termite hotels". It was drizzling now, not the downpour of earlier that day; scowling, I pulled my coat tighter around me and walked faster. My feet were almost immediately soaked, and I shivered with the chill that was in the air, one that shouldn't have been allowed in the month of August.

It wasn't long before I decided I didn't know the way as well as I had thought. I should have found it by then. Not sure what I should do, I decided to stick to the trail I was on, to just keep going forward: sooner or later I would find something familiar, or at least stumble across another campsite, where I could wake up a counselor and be brought back to where I belonged.

It was very dark; there was an odd look to one part of the sky where the moon was trying to shine through the clouds, but wasn't quite doing it: it simply lit the clouds from behind, turning them an eerie gray. There weren't any stars, any lights of any sort at all, beyond the dull gray the moon barely gave off. Pulling my coat even tighter around me, more from a growing sense of dread than the chill, I walked even faster. "There's no one out here," I told myself. "Just you, you idiot. You should have taken Narissa's flashlight." My feet were numb from the wet grass; I was sure I was crawling with ticks.

Quite suddenly the winding path came to an end; I was on a narrow dirt road that looked sort of familiar, but still alien in the dull grayness. Across the road was a road sign - one of those old-fashioned ones made of wood pointers nailed to a pole. I hurried up to it, squinting in the darkness, trying to read. Having had more than enough time for my eyes to adjust to the near-lightlessness, I could barely make out First Aid on the little board pointing to my left, Lake on the one pointing to my right.

I sighed with relief; I'd been on this road at least twenty times already. It wasn't really a road at all, but the main path. To my left would be the first aid station, the mess hall, and the administration building. To my right was the lake, and the clear, well-marked path on the other side of a little bridge - the one that went over a tiny creek that fed the lake - that led right to my campsite. All I had to do was go in a big circle: I'd be back, and no one would ever find out about my mistake.

Meanwhile, I was ready to explode. I think you know what I mean.

I turned right, walking even more quickly. My footsteps sounded like explosions; the only other sounds were my breathing and the frogs and crickets. I headed for the frog sound, relieved, because that meant I was going in the right direction. The lake was full of frogs.

I began counting my steps, determining how far it was from the signpost to the bridge, just for something to do. Now that I wasn't scared I was pretty bored. The rain finally stopped around step number 80 or so. On number 204, I heard voices. I grinned; they weren't the voices of girls my age, but low ones, adults. Men, from the sound of it. That meant the cooks. I began running; I was sure the cooks would give me a ride back to my campsite in their Jeep. My feet were so cold....

It took a couple moments, but I suddenly realized that the voices weren't talking in English. I slowed down, confused. The cooks were four college kids home for the summer and earning money by stuffing us Girl Scouts with cheeseburgers and hot dogs. Three were guys, one a girl. The girl had gone home the second day because she accidentally burned herself really badly, so it was just the three

guys now. There were three voices, yeah, but, not only were they not using English, but their voices were way, way too deep.

Then I heard some English.

"Stupid _gafha_ fool. Make _fadlak_ mess we _trouh_."

I heard a grunt, and a splash. Someone was in the water.

"rrrrrrrrrrrrrr... Get it quick," someone said. He had an odd growl to his voice, as if he was really mad. "rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr... Dawn come soon, rrrrrrrr... don't get caught."

Then a third man spoke. "_Veggef_ _dola_, hah hah. Delef _grat_, hah hah."

There was the sound of something splashing violently. "Shut up!" the first man snarled.

There was a snarling sound, and I jumped back, startled. The second man spoke. "rrrrrrr... Quiet! rrrrrrr...." There was silence for a few moments, before he spoke again. "rrrrrrr.... no talk. rrrrrrr..... worrrrrk. rrrrrrrr.... find that scrrrrrrrrrap."

"Scrap," the third man said. He sounded annoyed. "Must swim? _Gafna_ hoograt. Jufa viln quaa_. Pointless."

"rrrrrr.... shut up beforrrrrre you swim too."

Not wanting to startle them, I started toward the water slowly, being as quiet as I could. The moon peeked through the clouds, then was gone; I saw the glint of water; it was much closer than I thought. Suddenly, the ground simply vanished from under my feet; with a scream I fell down, down, into the water below.

Sploosh! I was under without any air in my lungs. My feet sank into the muck on the bottom of the lake. I looked up; the gloom looked just a few inches above my head. I tugged at my feet; they were about the same amount of inches sunk. My lungs hurt. My hair hung above me; I wore it long, a few inches below my shoulderblades when out of water. I pulled at my left leg, pulling until it came free, but, when it finally did, my right one sank even lower. I kicked with my left leg, pushing down with my arms, desperate to get to the surface, but my right foot remained stuck. The hurt in my lungs was incredible. I felt my eyelids getting heavy. The mucky water stung my eyes, but fear kept them open, along with the nagging thought that, if I closed them, I would never be able to open them again. I kicked, using both legs, working my right foot around in the mud. I pulled with my arms at the water, as if in a race to the surface with someone else, someone who wasn't there. I clamped my teeth together so tightly it hurt. I couldn't open my mouth, I couldn't, I-

I gasped for air, inhaling very deeply, just as my foot came loose and broke free. I took one last stroke with my arms, which moved me upward even as I choked. It was actually two feet to the surface; I barely managed to bob to the top with the tiny bit of pull I'd gotten. I threw my head back, gasping for air and gagging. I choked, put my head straight, and threw up in the water right in front of me. My arms and legs felt wooden, but they were waving back and forth

mechanically, keeping my head above water. My chest hurt so badly I was whimpering even as I was gagging and throwing up.

The moon broke through the clouds again, turning the water silver. The light wavered, then grew strong, stronger than the clouds that were still in the sky. Ripples glowed around me where the water moved.

Ten feet away, a crocodile was swimming straight toward me.

My eyes widened, but I didn't have the lung power to scream. How the heck was there a _crocodile_ in our _lake_?? I stared into its dead eyes, watching as it came. My limbs were barely doing anything - it was like they were working on automatic. My feet were not only numb, but they were making me sink, thanks to the mud that still clung to them and my sandals. My coat, too, was making it hard to stay above water.

I had to think. Had to think. Think. _Think!_

--

The croc was moving slowly, warily, as if waiting for me to do something. I planned to.

I took a deep breath, as deep as my lungs would let me. Ducking underwater, I shrugged out of my jacket, easily done since I'd never zipped it up. Forcing my legs and arms to work, I swam like a frog underwater, going sharply left, into deeper water, as far as I could. When my mouth threatened to open again, I forced myself to remain calm, going to the surface slowly, bobbing up with just my face above water, took another deep breath, then looked toward where I had come from, with only my eyes and the top of my head showing above the water.

And stared.

The crocodile's head was suspended above the water, without the rest of the crocodile attached; from it grew three horns, all in a row. It was on some sort of thin pillar, or maybe a thick neck in the wrong place. It sunk a little, suddenly, then bobbed upward again, as if it was standing in the six foot deep water and had lost its footing in the shifting mud. From the water, suspended in a heavily clawed hand, my coat rose up, completely clear of the water. My mom was going to kill me; it was obviously ruined. I'd ripped it almost in half, probably when I fell in.

The crocodile's weird, sharply hooked snout opened, and the _first_ voice came out of it_. "Human!" it barked. "In water, _gaih_ find! Now!"

There was another splash; I looked quickly toward my left. On the short, sandy area where we _usually_ went in the water, another weird crocodile was quickly swimming toward the first. As it turned out, I had fallen from a steep embankment we were warned on the first day never, _ever_ to go on (not that there was any more question why). Still on the sandy area was a human, one who stood stooped like a hunchback. It was definitely _not_ one of the cooks.

What was going on?

A soft breeze blew through my hair, chilling me; I shivered. The first crocodile stiffened, raising its ugly, beak-like snout. Then it glared directly at me. "There!" it cried.

"rrrrrr.... Catch it!" the man on the sandy area yelled.

Now there were two crocodiles after me.

What to do? Would they expect me to do the same trick twice?

I raised my face above water, took a deep breath, and dove straight down. Under the surface, I worked as fast as I could to unfasten the straps on one of my sandals. When I was almost done, I saw something glinting below me. It wasn't a reflection from above; it was blue, not silver. Abandoning my sandal, I paddled downward. I grabbed the blue thing; it suddenly turned green at my touch. It felt like plastic. I pulled; unlike my feet, it came out of the muck easily. I kicked with my feet; the loose sandal came off. I bobbed to the surface.

To my left, one of the crocodiles was searching for me. I smiled, hugging the strange, plastic thing as I kicked violently with my legs, trying to keep afloat without my arms. The plastic thing was heavy - maybe five, six pounds.

I kicked something.

I didn't have time to scream before the second crocodile - the one who had waited for me in case I did what I had - pulled me back under.

I was sputtering as the strange thing carried me to the sandy area, and the hunchbacked man. The crocodile-headed thing had arms like a human's, except that it had less fingers, and huge claws. It had a tight grip; my already hurting lungs were having an even harder time taking in air, because it had me around my chest, pinning my upper arms to my sides. I wasn't sure why, but I refused to drop the green thing in my hands. It was as if the reality of it could keep me safe from the un-reality of what was happening to me.

The crocodile-headed thing was tall; I was a few feet above the ground. "Let go of me!" I screamed. I might have been crying; I did cry, but I don't remember when I started. "Let me go!"

"rrrrrr... do it," the second voice said.

"Gala-"

"rrrrDO IT!" I was dropped. My legs wouldn't hold me; I sprawled on all fours on the cement-like sand, dropping the green thing. I was shivering so hard I was shaking. I puked one more time, directly on the green thing, now in front of me since I'd dropped it. It was blue again.

"Reldrit," the first voice said behind me. It sounded disgusted. "You touch. I bliuh touch."

"rrrr...Quiet, Delef." The hunchback approached me; I saw his shadow

in the sickly moonlight. I cowered away; my hair hung in slimy strips around my face. One of his hands lifted my chin up, while the other brushed my hair away from my face.

I screamed. It wasn't a man at all, but some sort of sick, deformed monkey. It couldn't be human, it just couldn't be! A heavy brow hung low over its small eyes, eyes turned completely black and dead in the pale light; a muzzle-like mouth with a scowl fit to have King Kong give up his crown hung, almost loosely, on the bottom of its face. In between, a wide, almost flat nose flared at me, taking in my scent. The hands had three fingers, not four, and its two arms were different lengths, one almost half a foot too long and one at least half a foot too short. It was very hairy, with wiry, stiff, bristly fur that was made colorless thanks to the lack of light. "rrrrr... Who arrrrrrre you?" the second voice asked me in a dangerously soft voice.

"Let me go, please," I whimpered. "Please, can I go? I need to go."

"_Gafah_!" the first voice snarled at me. Something hit me, or kicked me, I don't know which; I sprawled, face-down now, not on all fours, and stayed that way, sobbing. Now my side hurt, too, where whatever it was had hit/kicked me.

"rrrrrrrENOUGH!" the ape snapped. It crouched down; I could see

one of its big, ugly, three-fingered hands a little ways in front of me. Then its eyes were there; they twinkled a little in the vague light. "rrrrr.....what arrrrrrrrre you herrrrrre forrrrrrr?" it asked, slowly, as if it didn't think I would understand. As if I was stupid.

"I... I want to go home," I whimpered, and squeezed my eyes shut. I

didn't want to see that thing. I just wanted to go home, to wake up in my own bed. "I want my mommy!"

"rrrrrr..." I heard the ape move around. Then I was lifted by my upper arms again. "rrrrrr... stand up. Nowrrr." Afraid, I forced my legs to work, perching myself on my feet. I opened my eyes again. My chin shook so much there was no way I could say anything - not that I wanted to. "rrrrrrr... we mean no hurrrrrrrrrt to you." The scowl turned upward a little into a grimace. "rrrrrrr... we will not hurrrrrrrrrrrt rrrryou."

"_Bahf_ _nildra_ orders-" the third voice spoke out. I heard splashing; the other crocodile was coming out of the water.

"rrrrrrI lead, rrrryou shut rrrup!" The ape let me go. It was about as tall as I was - four feet or so; I was tall for my age - with a head that was too big and shoulders that were too narrow. Its legs were different lengths too, so that it stood at an angle. I sort of giggled: it looked like it would tip over. Because of my sobbing, though, my giggle sounded like a big snort. That just made me giggle more. More snorting. I just kept doing it until a sob shook my entire body, and I stopped. The ape waited for me to finish. "rrrrrYou come with rrrrrrus," it said. "We will not hurrrrrt rrrryou." It patted me on the head. I sniffed.

"What we _fugg_ with _duf_ human _kawatnoj_?" the first voice asked, sounding shocked.

"rrrrrTo Visserrrrrrr. She decide." The ape held out its hand. "rrrrrYourrrrrrrrr hand." I gave it my hand, though my hand was shaking so much it had a hard time getting ahold of it. When it did, it held on tight.

Then it shoved something in my stomach with its other hand, and-

Well, then I fell.

I fell a long, long time.

Just before I hit the ground, I woke up. With a jerk, I sat straight up.

The first thing I realized was that I didn't have to _go_ anymore.

The second thing was the lake was gone.

The third thing was that it wasn't the lake that was gone - it was me.

The light was really different; it was dull red now, which hurt my eyes a little. It was still almost dark; I was in a small box, maybe five feet on all sides, with black walls and nothing else. I looked down at myself; I was in my nightgown, the pair of sweatpants I'd worn to bed because I was cold, and one sandal, all of which were muddy. My nightgown's sleeves were tattered, and it was badly ripped on one side. Under that rip was a long, ugly scratch that went from my armpit to my hip. My hair was heavy; I tried to run my hand through it, but it was a rat's nest of stiff tangles. I simply couldn't run my fingers through without tugging too painfully to continue. I whimpered, rubbing my left hand with my right. It's a nervous habit I've had since I was six: I was bitten by a very rough black Labrador retriever. I had to get a lot of stitches, and they itched a lot. Ever since, when I'm nervous or something, I rub at it, which was about all I could do without my mom telling me not to itch the stitches, while I had them. I've also had an insane fear of labs since. I know they won't hurt me, but.... I don't know. I just can't go near them.

It was absolutely silent. I scooted backwards, into a corner, and hugged my legs close to my body, still massaging my hand.

Suddenly, one of the walls opened in the box. It simply dimpled inward, then turned back on itself. The ape - or maybe another one - stood there. "rrrrrrCome," it said, more roughly now. It grabbed my arm. Whimpering, too scared to cry out, I followed it down the long hallway outside my box.

We walked a long time, up and down hallways. At one point we got into an empty elevator shaft and shot straight up: I think I screamed, I'm not sure. Finally we went through an open doorway, to a small room, where there was a little, bubbling pool of yellowish-green water, and another creature. Not an ape, not a crocodile, but... the memory

isn't clear. It's a blur, really. Just a blur standing near a wall.

The ape shoved me; I yelped as it forced me onto my knees in front of the bubbling, disgusting-smelling pool of even more disgusting liquid. It grabbed me by the back of the head, then shoved downward.

For the second time - in too little time - I found myself unable to breath. It was just my head now, but that wasn't any better than having my entire body under water. Having a hand at the back of my head was just as bad as having my feet stuck in mud at the bottom of the lake. I felt a squirming sensation at my left ear, before my entire ear went completely numb, even more numb than my feet had been.

The ape let go; I threw my head back, gasping for air. The thing in the corner seemed amused.

I felt my entire body going numb. Remembering the odd feeling at my ear, I tried to reach for it, see if anything was wrong-

I couldn't move my hand. My arm jerked, as if it was glued to the floor, but that wasn't true at all. My arm simply didn't do anything more than one jerk. I tried again; this time it didn't even jerk. I tried the other one - that one didn't move either. I tried to blink; I couldn't. I tried to scream: nothing.

It is going to be fine. Just relax.

I heard the voice, but where was it coming from? I wanted to cry again, but I couldn't. I just couldn't. I couldn't do anything. What was happening to me? I was paralyzed! I couldn't even blink! I couldn't even make myself breathe!

> Something else was doing it!<p>

I couldn't move, breathe, blink, speak.... all I could do was think.

Let me go! I screamed in my head. I want to go home!

You will, the voice said. It was gentle, tired. Sarah... Casey-Sarah, you must calm down. Everything is going to be just fine.

It could hear my thoughts? How did it know my name? Leave me alone! I want to go home!

You will go home, Sarah. Please, stop screaming. No one is going

to hurt you. I won't let them hurt you, Sarah. I sort of felt the voice sigh. How did I feel that? How did they know what I was thinking? What was going on?! I found myself standing up, but I didn't want to. I tried to fight it, to kneel back down, but still I stood up. I stopped sniveling. My face went slack; I felt it do that. My arms hung, relaxed, at my sides. It'll be all right, the voice said. I'm not going to hurt you, and I won't let anyone else hurt you. You remember that monkey, Sarah? That was me. I want to help you. You must trust me.

How can you be the monkey?

The voice sort of chuckled. I wasn't the monkey, really, the voice said. I was in the monkey. Now I'm in you. Don't be afraid, Sarah. It will be just fine, you'll see.

I don't understand!

I will explain later, Sarah. Just calm down. You can trust me. You'll see, everything's going to be okay.

My mouth opened, but I didn't want it to. The words that came out weren't words that I wanted to speak. I wanted to scream, to cry, to shriek at the top of my lungs. Instead, I spoke plainly, calmly, but I wasn't even speaking in English. "I have her under control now," I said. "She is very frightened. Very young."

The creature near the pool did its equivalent of smiling. "You are sure you have control?" it asked in a language I shouldn't have understood. "It took you too long to do it."

"As I said, she is very afraid. We already knew of the strong emotions in these creatures, but it seems their emotions are even more heightened in their young. Fascinating."

"You understand what you are to do?"

"Act as if I am this girl - yes, I understand. What is there not to understand? The planet-based pool is ready?"

"It will suffice for now. You'll have to be in the pool for four times as long - we must find a better place for the ground-based Kandrona - but it will suffice."

I nodded. "Then I am free to go?"

"Delef will return you to your original landing site." The creature smiled even more. "Thank you, little creature, for finding our evidence for us. It saved us a great deal of time in searching for it."

"Please do not taunt my host, my Visser," I said. "She is scared enough."

"Make sure she stays that way. Now go."

I turned around and left the room, heading back the way I had come. To me, it was like I was walking in no particular direction, but I did so in a way that seemed directed, but by someone else. I didn't want to walk down the dimly lit corridors; I wanted to curl up into a ball and cry. I came to another of the elevator shafts, stepped in, and dropped. Four decks down, the strange voice said.

Who are you? How are you in my head? I screamed at the voice.

It sighed. Please, Sarah - not yet, it replied. We're going back to the camp. I'll explain when we get there, all right?

I slowed to a stop, even though nothing was beneath my feet, and stepped out of the shaft. I was at a small platform, with three

vehicles on it. They were about the size of minivans, with two, construction-pipe-sized things connected to the sides, but no wheels. They looked like legless beetles. Stepping up to the one in the middle, I waited for a ramp to lower, then stepped in.

I didn't want to see anymore; hiding in a hidden corner of my mind, I did curl up into that ball, and refused to look at what was happening to me.

When I was forcibly pulled out of that corner, I saw I was in the woods again. Dawn was just starting to lighten the sky. I know you, Sarah, the voice said as I sat down on a log - again, something I didn't want to do. I know you, because of where I am, but you don't know me. You don't know anything. That isn't fair. Very little is fair, of course - but, if I'm to help you, you have to know, and to understand. Listen to me, Sarah. Relax, and let me tell you who and what I am, and what is going on.

I had no choice. I sat on the log, and....

I can't explain it: there's no words for what happened. It was as if my mind had merged with someone else's. I felt someone else, though I couldn't see them.

I saw things, but they were in my mind. Creatures, more numerous and strange than you can imagine. I saw many slugs. I saw death. I saw life. I saw many things in between. But mostly I felt an exhaustion, and a loneliness like I had never imagined could possibly exist.

You? I whispered.

Yes, the voice said. It was kind, but mostly, it was very, very tired. My name is Udrak. Udrak Eight-Eight-Eight, of the Rel Driak pool.

CHAPTER 1

"Sarah? You awake?"

"She is very awake, Cassie. A-wae-kah."

I jerked. The dog under my hand whined, wondering why the petting had stopped. Blinking in bright sunlight that seemed to be shining on me from out of nowhere, I patted the seeing-eye dog on the head. "Thank you," I said to its owner.

He smiled, not quite at me. "Hey, no problem. He loves the attention."

I smiled at my friends as we walked away. "I'm okay, really."

"Your mind just seemed to float away," Cassie chided me, smiling too. "Where'd you go?"

I shrugged. "The past. It's cheaper than getting in here."

Aximili frowned. He exaggerated it without meaning to; he looked so much like a mime frowning I had to force myself not to giggle. "You must pay to remember? Pay money?"

I laughed. "Joke, Ax."

He nodded, saying nothing more on the subject. Aximili isn't much on the humor department. Andalites in general have a lack in that area. Andalites in human morph don't have any more insights, as it turns out:

I guess humor isn't a human instinct.

Maybe if Aximili acquired Marco he'd understand. It has to be an instinct in Marco. No one can come up with a punchline as fast as he can.

Well, no doubt you're confused. Well, ask someone else, because I am not the one to ask questions from, because I am possibly the most complicated of us and will give you a headache quite quickly. I'll try to keep it under a thousand words for now.

There are seven of us, though there were only three at the moment. Cassie and Aximili are possibly the closest people I have to best friends, although Aximili is a bit more of a friend than Cassie is because we spend more time together. Cassie is a little younger than me (actually, except for Aximili, who ages slower and therefore doesn't count in respect to age seniority, I'm the oldest) and a little shorter, a black girl who is possibly the only female on the face of planet Earth who wears her hair that short (not including those with crewcuts or baldness). She'd just gotten it cut, and I mean, she was nearly bald. She didn't like it, either, so I kept quiet about it. She has really nice, sincere brown eyes I wish I had - mine are an ugly, moldy-puke hazel color I hate with a vengeance. They're not really hazel, but not brown or green either. Well, actually it isn't an ugly color - I just wish they were more normal, you know? They're just so weird. You'd understand if you could see them. Cassie's hair is maybe one shade lighter than black, while mine is sort of the color of very burnt toast - not dirty blond, but not brown, either. I wear mine short, too, but not nearly as short as Cassie wears hers; mine's really thick, and kind of wavy, so generally I wear it just as long as I can without having to really deal with it. It goes to my neck, and sorta bushes out from there. Needless to say, Cassie and I look nothing alike. We're not alike in character much, either - she's quiet, I'm curt. She's sincere, I'm cynical. She's gentle, I'm blunt. She says "poe-TAY-toe", I say "pah-TAH-da". Did I mention I have a slight accent sometimes?

New England relations. They rub off on you.

Aximili is a third extreme. He's the smartest of us, hands down, but, at the same time, he's the most naïve. Aximili's name sounds so weird because he's an alien - and I'm not talking illegal, even if he doesn't have a green card. Normally he has extra pairs of eyes and legs and a long, dangerously powerful tail that ends in a cruel, scythe-like blade, which is the reason why he doesn't have a green card. Unlike Cassie he doesn't go out of his way not to hurt people's feelings - he doesn't do it purposely, but he's not as careful; unlike me, he likes being exact while I like being precise. The difference is that he will go on for hours to be exact. I will be precise in about three minutes. Cassie takes what time she needs to keep everyone getting along and no one offended. She's a very patient person, Cassie.

My third best friend is Tobias. Tobias and I are not friends in the same way Cassie and Aximili and I are. Where Cassie and I like each other's company and Aximili and I like to discuss things, Tobias and I just hang out in his meadow sometimes. Usually we don't say much to each other. I love to watch him fly - not fly with Tobias, just watch him. Most of the others will say that flying is the coolest part of being who we are. I guess they don't take the time to watch others fly all that much anymore. Some days I spend out in the woods, just sitting down in Tobias' meadow to read, while he perches above me, reading over my shoulder. I purposely read slow so he can actually read the entire book: lots of times he's read parts of books by soaring over people sunning on the beach. I read the entirety of The Client simply because Tobias had read the middle twelve chapters and didn't know the beginning or end. I didn't tell him that was the only reason, though. It was a pretty good book, so I didn't mind it.

The other three of us are Jake, Rachel, and Marco. I don't see them as often as I do Tobias, Ax, and Cassie, because they live in neighborhoods and I have to avoid people. Jake and Rachel are cousins, but the only physical thing they have in common is that they're taller than the rest of us short people (except Aximili in his true form; he stands a little taller than Jake that way, even if he didn't have his extra eyes on stalks on the top of his head). Jake has short, brown hair and serious brown eyes; the two of us look more like cousins than he and Rachel do. Like me he's solid, but, as I said, taller. I guess he's cute, but I'm not into the strong-looking type. Rachel has blond hair and blue eyes, a very-wholesome-and-clean-cut- future-Baywatch-lifeguard-type person who nevertheless has a very dangerous side you don't want to tread on. Rachel is not a person to take lightly. Meanwhile, Marco, Jake's best friend, is often impossible to take seriously. Marco is undeniably cute, but, like I said, looks don't mean much to me. That's probably because I dislike what I look like. Marco's forever making jokes, which can be kind of annoying, especially since, like me, he likes getting the last word in any situation. We often have dialogues, sometimes for hours at a time, where we're just trading nonsense, trying to say something the other can't come up with rebuttal for. He usually wins.

Hmmm. Nine hundred twenty-three words. I'm getting better.

At the moment, Aximili, in human form, Cassie, and I - Casey-Sarah, though if you call me that I'll "do a Rachel": that is, give you a glare that lets you know that doing it again will earn you something unpleasant rammed down your throat; Sarah does fine, thank you - were roaming around the Gardens. We were looking for things for me to acquire. So far, I'd gotten a grasshopper, a dragonfly, and probably the eighth dog I've done. (I'll explain later.) Nothing substantial - which was the very reason we were there. The Gardens is one of those Busch Gardens/Six Flags type amusement park-slash-zoo places, and a really nice place to be. Usually.

Not on Saturdays. Saturdays, it looks like Disney World in the middle of summer.

The lines were horrendous. There were screaming little kids everywhere, and I don't particularly care for little kids in general, and screaming ones in particular. It was hot and stuffy and the amount of

people there made the day seem hotter and stuffier and, to sum it up, if it wasn't for Cassie and Aximili I would have not wasted the Chee's money to go there.

But, then again, if certain people recognize me, I'm as good as dead, so crowds can be good things, I suppose. Even if I hate them more than I do the color of my eyes. I'm the loner type: give me a book and a quiet room and I'm happy for hours. Nowadays, even a math textbook is good.

I'll return to complaining later. Sorry - I'm easily distracted by certain things, like listing what bugs me. On with the story.

"Cassie, we're getting nowhere," I said. I gave her a pointed look. "Can we please do something constructive?"

Cassie rolled her eyes. "We will, relax! The dolphin show is getting out in five minutes. We can get you a dolphin if you'd just be patient."

"That's good," I said, sighing. I rubbed my forehead, feeling the sliminess of my skin. It was slimy from sweat. Yuck. I also felt the massive headache I always get when I go to amusement parks being born, from the vague, ugly pounding in my forehead. "When we do, could one of you push me into the tank? It's like Hades out here."

"Only if you push me," Cassie said. We laughed. Again, Aximili didn't get it. He thought we were being serious: he asked who would push him, since we were pushing each other. He thought it was some sort of human ritual, which he made a point of saying, "actually makes sense". That made Cassie and I laugh harder; it took awhile before I could explain. I don't know: with Aximili, I'm very, very patient, more so than with anyone else. Maybe it's because he's the only one who has any idea what I lost three weeks prior to this episode. More on that - and everything else I'm putting off - later.

We headed toward the dolphin tanks. We probably looked like a strange trio - two stocky girls, one kind of pretty, one built like - and about as attractive as - a short brick wall (_Me? _Self-esteem_ problem?), and one tall, extremely pretty boy. Cassie was in a tanktop, jean shorts, and a big pair of boots, Aximili in a tee shirt, jeans, and sneakers, and I was actually wearing a swimsuit, a pair of Umbro shorts, and sandals. I wore the swimsuit for a very special reason; if an emergency popped up, it wouldn't rip.

We finally got to the dolphin area when the crowd was starting to stand up. We waited for everyone to leave, then headed in. One of the trainers glared at us, then saw Cassie and waved. Cassie and I waved back.

There was one very important reason why Cassie was with me, and it's not just that she's my friend: her mother works at the Gardens. Very useful when you're trying to pet the animals not included in the petting zoo.

I crouched down by the side of the dolphin tank. Three of the six dolphins came up to me, curious about this new person and wanting to know if I brought any peace offerings. "Sorry, no salmon this time,"

I said, rubbing one of their bottle-like noses. I closed my eyes.

The familiar, half-burning, half-tingling sensation went through me. The others say that they don't feel a thing when they acquire animals; me, I get such a case of pins-and-needles that it's almost painful. When I acquired Aximili - the first creature I ever acquired - it took me by complete surprise: I almost screamed at the shock of it. Now I was used to it.

I took my hand off the dolphin, which nudged my hand with its nose, wanting a reward for helping me. Like the seeing-eye dog, it didn't go into an acquiring trance, which most creatures do when acquired. For some reason, most things I acquire don't go into that trance. That makes it very difficult to acquire certain skittish creatures - like grasshoppers.

That biological spring is painful when you annoy the grasshopper.

"Got it," I told the others. Cassie nodded. She waved to another trainer, who came up to us to ask us to leave. We apologized and left without any trouble - after all, we'd gotten what we'd come for.

"Okay," Cassie said, sighing. "Here comes the part I've been dreading."

"The let's-_almost_-break-the-rules part?" I asked, smiling.

Cassie nodded. "We're going in the back," she said. "My mom should be prepping her patient now, I mean - what time is it?"

I looked at my watch. "Five minutes to two."

"Mom said it was at two. Let's go."

Cassie led Aximili and I through the park with expert ease. "I don't see why you feel so bad in a mall," I joked. "What's the big difference here? I mean, besides the lack of ceiling and the fact that you're not supposed to bring anything home from here."

"The mall is Rachel's habitat. The barn and this part of the Gardens - those are mine."

"Just as Ax's is the woods and mine is basements," I added in a wise voice.

Ax looked a little confused, but Cassie laughed. "Basements full of dogs," she added. She led the way into the main building, where animals that have to be kept warm are housed.

"Basements full of dogs that talk," I retorted.

"Basements full of dogs that talk that take care of dogs that bark."

"Basements full of dogs that talk that take care of dogs that bark all day and all night and man, am I lucky my closet is soundproof."

Cassie laughed again. "Here we are!"

"Otters?" I looked over the partition at the otters, frolicking in their own miniature water park. One of them barked at me, and slipped into the water. It went right to the edge; I looked down at it, only to get splashed as it flipped over and went underwater again. I rolled my eyes, and wiped the spray off my face. "Okay, enough intelligent conversation with animals, I'll stick with my dogs," I said. "Where are we going, exactly?"

"Here. Come on - don't stand around, you look suspicious." Cassie opened a door painted the same color as the wall, one that led behind the otter exhibit. "Let's go. Come on! Ax!"

Aximili was still looking at the otters. I held the door open until he was inside, then shut it behind me. "O-kay," I said, looking at the completely blank walls. "Under the penalty of repeating myself, I ask - now where are we?"

"Behind the scenes," Cassie said. "Come on - it's room V-108. Down this hall, turn down the third right, turn right again, turn the second left, and it should be right there."

We walked down the wide hallway, our footsteps echoing against the walls and ceiling and coming back to us, as if someone was following us. I looked at the various doors, labeled with letters and numbers that appeared random. "I feel like I'm in a nuthouse."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, white walls, doors without windows, none of them open? I feel like, if I open one, I'll be looking in a padded room, not a habitat or cage."

"It is kind of bare. I guess you get used to it."

"Efficiency. That's what it's about." I scowled a little, then forced my mouth back into a normal expression.

Cassie didn't miss it, though. "What's wrong?"

I thought about keeping it to myself, then decided it didn't matter.

"Efficiency's wrong," I said with a dry chuckle. "The slugs are all about efficiency, too. I've come to dislike it."

Cassie nodded. "It's the past, Sarah. You're one of us now."

"Am I?" The others looked at me, surprised at the bitterness in my voice. I shook my head; no, I wasn't going to explain. I couldn't explain. I didn't quite understand it yet, but, for some reason, I knew - knew - I would never be an Animorph.

"Animorph" is a term Marco coined for a human who can turn into animals through the use of an Andalite Escafil Device - a technology which allows whoever uses it to acquire the DNA of any animal they touch. That's why Cassie, Aximili, and I were at the Gardens, two weeks after I had officially become an Animorph.

Supposedly. I wasn't quite sure yet.

We turned right at the end of the hallway, which led into another hall exactly like it.

- _I turned around and left the room, heading back the way I had come. To me, it was like I was walking in no particular direction, but I did so in a way that seemed directed, but by someone else_ -

I shuddered, shaking my head. The sense of déjà vu faded. "Cold?" Cassie asked me.

"Um... yeah." I rubbed my arms, but the chill that ran through me had nothing to do with the cooler temperature of the air-conditioned hallways. We turned down the third hallway on the right. We stopped. "Um... Cassie?"

"Uh... yeah?"

"What were those directions again?"

"Down the main hall, turn right... maybe it was the _second_ right, turn right, and the _third_ left." The problem was simple: instead of the hall we had expected, there was a door. One door, labeled G-034. I didn't want to know what was behind it.

At least it wasn't P-203. I was definitely into avoiding door P-203.

Unlike what we were looking for, the tigers in P-203 wouldn't be sedated.

We backtracked to the second right, where there _was_ a hallway. We took the first right turn off that hallway, then the third left turn.

Another deadened, this one with four doors. V-101, V-104, V-108, and V-110. Cassie opened the door to V-108.

Inside was a room that looked exactly like a veterinarian's office, except that the main table was a _lot_ bigger - the size of a dining room table for ten people. There were the syringes, the little refrigerator, the cages - also _much_ bigger - the smell of disinfectant, urine, and fur. A dark woman with her hair tied tightly back, wearing a surgical mask, was measuring something into a syringe with a very long needle.

"Hi, Mom," Cassie said. "I'm here."

The woman nodded, acknowledging us, but kept her concentration on her work until she was satisfied with it. Then she turned around. Her eyes turned upward as she smiled beneath her mask. "Perfect timing, Cassie," she said. "He just went under. Hello, Philip." Aximili nodded in greeting: Philip was the name he generally used for his human morph. She looked at me, and her eyebrows pulled downward in a look of confusion.

"I'm Casey," I said, forcing myself not to cringe. I _hate_ being called Casey.

"Casey and Cassie," Cassie's mother said, shaking her head. "That must be fun when you're with your friends." She stuck the needle all the way into the shoulder of the thing on the table.

Did I mention something was on the operating table? No? Oh, sorry.

It was about five feet long, with lean, almost gawky legs and short claws. Its long tail - the tail was as long as the creature was tall - hung limply off the end of the table. Its fur was a tawny orange-gold, covered in small, solid spots of black. Its eyes were not overly large, but they were a beautiful, darker orange-gold than its fur: it had a thin ring of black around each eye, like someone had been too generous with the mascara on the poor thing. The "mascara" markings looked as if they had run, as black lines ran from the corner of the animal's eyes down to its mouth, framing an equally black nose. It wasn't overly impressive, this animal. It was small, no bigger than Cassie.

But, oooooh man, did I love it at first sight. "How old is he?" I asked.

"This guy's four years old - right in his prime. He came down with a cold though, poor fella - he's first on the vaccination list. I'll get his brothers tomorrow."

"What is he, exactly?" I asked, even though Cassie had told me before. If Cassie hadn't known what her mom was doing, I wouldn't have been there.

"Carnivora Felidae Acinonyx jubatus," Cassie's mom replied.

"'jubatus'? Jaguar?" I looked down at the spotted cat again, doing my best to look confused, even though I knew my "guess" was wrong. "I thought jaguars were bigger."

"They are," Cassie said. "And they don't have solid spots like this - they have rosettes, round spots with dots in the middle. This is a cheetah."

"Ah. Cheetah." I grinned. "How fast are these guys?"

"Cheetahs are able to reach speeds of over sixty miles per hour for short distances," Aximili said. He's good at facts. He read the entire World Book once, along with The Guinness Book of World Records.

I continued to grin. I grin when I'm impressed.

The cat looked impressive now.

"Can I touch it?"

Cassie's mom looked at me out of the corner of her eye, thinking about it. "I suppose so," she said, but her voice held an unspoken rebuke. My mother had often used that same "I'd rather you not do something stupid" tone. She'd used it a lot. "Just don't pull his tail or anything."

"Not a problem." I approached the table slowly. With a pang of regret, I saw that the cheetah was strapped to the table. I didn't really have to worry about him waking up - at least, not if those straps held. Reaching out, I put my hand on his soft, spotted flank. It rose and fell as the cheetah breathed easily, in and out. I smiled a little, thinking about what it might be like, to run at sixty miles an hour. I thought about being a spotted streak of orange and black. The familiar tingling burn came to me; the cheetah stirred, grunting in his enforced, open-eyed sleep. Feeling daring, I rubbed the spotted fur between his ears before backing up again. "He's beautiful," I said.

"Yes, he is. I'm almost done, Cassie. I just have to call Ed and have him get our friend back here in his habitat. Then I'll take you to the dentist."

Cassie stuck out her tongue. I chuckled. "Thank you for letting us see the cheetah, Dr. _____," I said. "I just went to the dentist last month, so I think I'll leave Cassie to the fun."

Cassie gave me a friendly glare. "Thanks."

"Come on, Philip - no need for you to get your teeth cleaned." I thanked Cassie's mom again, then headed out. Aximili followed me.

Getting out of the sterile hallways was much less exciting than getting in - in other words, Aximili and I got out without getting lost. We watched the otters for awhile, then meandered around some of the other exhibits before leaving entirely. We went together into the woods.

He was going home. I? I had to try out my new morph! (The land one, anyway.)

CHAPTER 2

Aximili was about half a mile away, comfortably settled in his scoop. Tobias' meadow was somewhere way off to my right. I was alone, as far as I could tell. The birds were singing, so there couldn't be that many humans around anyway. I had taken off my sandals and shorts, and stood in just the bathing suit.

Feeling the familiar sense of fear and determination I always do when I morph, I clenched my fists and concentrated.

You see, the problem with my ability to morph does not end with the pins-and-needles feeling I get when I acquire something. It extends to when I actually morph, too. When the others morph, the changes are unpredictable, but at least nothing breaks.

With me, something is bound to break.

The first change was the fur. Orange clumps of fur began growing all over my body. With a sharp, gunshot-like crack, my feet suddenly elongated, while, with four harsh crunch sounds, both parts of my legs crumbled in on themselves as they shrank. I gasped in pain as my fingers, too, collapsed, as my knucklebones showed for a moment before they sharpened, becoming dark claws. My upper teeth sharpened

without warning, and my instantaneous fangs buried themselves deep into my lower lip. I forced my mouth open, and could see blood dripping from my now furry chin. I whimpered at the pain, even as the holes sealed themselves up. The tail suddenly shot out of my backside with a sound like an automatic machine gun - _cracracracracrack-ck-ck-ck-ck!_ It was a sound I was rapidly becoming used to - most of my morphs had tails. After all, eight of them were dogs. The black dots of fur all over my body began growing in, so that I lost the look of something orange that had been attacked by a rabid electric razor.

Strangely, the last physical change that I could see came in my nose. I was all cat except for a very human nose. Finally, my nose melted like wax, spreading over a bigger portion of my face, and turned coal black.

Movement!

I whipped my head to the side. No, more, over there!

Was I a cat, or a hawk?

The hearing was pretty good - better than a human's, sure, but not as strong as some of the dogs I've been. The sense of smell was not as good as a dog's either. But the eyesight! The closest thing I could compare it to was the harrier morph I have. It wasn't just the eyesight, though - I could actually _see_ distances. I'm not saying I was farsighted - I mean, I could judge distance to the nearest _inch_. Blades of grass stood out like they were yards apart.

Raptors can see distances, and their judgment of them is pretty good, but most raptors rely on surprise to catch their prey. Cheetahs rely on speed, on a very quick catch, or else they'll tire out. They can't be wrong about distance.

I paced forward, getting the feel of the feline body. It was more graceful than the dogs, but at the same time didn't feel much different. The gawky look of the cheetah was much like a dog's normal stride. I felt cool, in control. The instincts weren't awesomely overpowering - except in the hunt, predators generally aren't hard to control. I felt... awesome. That's the only word for it, really. I was one cool cat, and no one had better think about messing with me.

Forest. Hmm. Not the best of places - I needed a plain, or at least a field. Somewhere where sprinting wouldn't be a problem. I was an open- space sort of animal. I needed _room_.

It wasn't long before I came upon a suitable place - an open field, not all that big, but big enough. I looked it over - yes, there were signs of smaller prey. Not great, but satisfactory. I climbed up on a long, rotted log, and sat there, my tail curled around my feet. It was a nice place.

Rabbit.

My ears pricked forward; I stared openly at the little creature. The wind was at my face; it couldn't smell me. I climbed off the log, pacing low in the high grass, out of sight. I was in no hurry. The

rabbit wasn't going anywhere. I was fine. Stalking was a game: how close could I get without the rabbit noticing me? That was the game. It was fun. I felt powerful. I felt in control.

I also felt a little silly, stalking something so small, my tail swishing back and forth as if I was still a cub stalking a field mouse, but you had to make do with what you had. There weren't any impalas in this pathetic little field. Impalas, like me, preferred a lot more open territory.

I was about fifty yards away when the rabbit stopped moving. I didn't stop; I kept up my slow, easy, belly-dragging crawl. How close could I get? How close.

Forty-eight yards, that's how close. That's when the rabbit bolted.

My spine snapped straight, and I was flying. That's how it felt. I was off like a rubber band. I wasn't running; I was flying, two feet off the ground.

That rabbit was going backwards, I was flying so fast!

Then, suddenly, it hit me. My memory came back to me with the same chilling clarity, but this was a fresh memory, one from moments, not years, before.

- I felt cool, in control. The instincts weren't awesomely overpowering - except in the hunt, predators generally aren't hard to control -

I slammed on the brakes. My claws, not retracted like I expected them to be, dug into the dirt. Gracelessly, putting all cheetahs to shame, I tumbled forward from sheer momentum, a sprawling ball of black-spotted orange fur. The rabbit scampered away as fast as its little bunny feet could carry it, not looking back, and shot down a hole in the ground, out of sight.

In spite of the short run, I was out of breath. I was panting a little. I pushed upward with my forelegs, sitting up. My tail curled around my feet again.

What was happening to me?

It wasn't like this was something new to me - being able to remember things with unnatural clarity. But it was something that shouldn't have been happening anymore.

Seven years ago, the Yeerks - the creatures I and the Animorphs fight - captured me because I was a very unlucky little girl who was in the very worst place at a very bad time. I was infested by a Yeerk - "infested", because Yeerks are slugs able to enter the brains of other creatures and manipulate them like puppets - named Udrak Eight-Eight-Eight. He wasn't like most Yeerks, though - he never got used to taking over hosts, suppressing them into submission. He hated it so badly he did all he could to avoid it. When he was ordered to infest me, at first he kept me suppressed, deep in my mind. I couldn't do anything. Then, when I was returned to Earth, he took me out of my corner.

When Yeerks infest their hosts, they open up their memories. This is a natural instinct in Yeerks - this is how, in lesser animals, they tapped into the instincts of the creature they infested, and were able to do things like walk, and escape predators. It allowed them to know the tricks the animal had learned in escaping its enemies. In higher animals, the areas of the brain they open also include the memories of the individual person. The host has this terrible sense of violation, of vulnerability, but in truth that is what keeps either of them alive. On the other hand, the Yeerk's memories are kept separate. The Yeerk can choose to share its thoughts with its host, but it's not true the other way around. The Yeerk cannot hide its emotions, but it can keep the host out of its head, so to speak.

Udrak didn't do that. Keep to himself, that is. Once we weren't being watched anymore he sat us down and opened his memories. He pulled down the barriers between us. He let me know what he was thinking, not just how he felt. Over the years, I grew used to the second line of thought in my head. We got used to sharing my body, my voice, my head.

Then, quite suddenly, about four years ago, I realized something very profound. It was at the Yeerk pool - then about the size of a department store, not a small town, as it is now -, and I was bending over the reinfestation pier, waiting anxiously for Udrak to return to me. When I felt the familiar feeling of numbness start to spread through me, I smiled to myself and let the Hork-Bajir watchers help us to our feet.

That was the profound thing.

For the first time, I thought of Udrak and I as us. Not him and me. Not Udrak and Casey-Sarah.

Just us.

No I. No him. Just we.

From that moment on, Udrak's memory and my own became blurred. I mean, I knew the difference between his life and mine. I knew what he and I had experienced separately. It's just that, after three years with so little separating us, I had gained some of a Yeerk's ability to call a memory at will with utter clarity. A Yeerk, when kept healthy, does not forget much. Udrak's ability to recall the past clearly had become my own, just as my ability to control my legs was shared with him.

Everything I had was his, and all that was his, was mine.

But this... this should have been lost. This ability to remember.

I sat in the middle of the field, feeling lost and alone. My tail twitched jerkily, and I sighed. My ears flattened against my head as if they had a will of their own. No thoughts of comfort came to me; the cheetah had no sympathy to offer. It was hungry; it wanted to stalk again, to play its game, then fly on complete instinct after its partner in the game until that partner either got lucky, and escaped, or the cheetah won, and dragged its partner to a safe place to eat it. That's all. No sympathy; no feeling of it's going to be

all right_. Just _let's play, let's catch and kill, let's eat_.

Udrak... I whispered, Udrak, where are you? I need you!

But Udrak was dead. Starved, weak, refusing to live a moment longer, he gave himself completely to the fugue - the Yeerk word for death by starvation from Kandrona rays. He couldn't soothe my fears anymore than I could bring him back to life. I had to deal with them on my own.

But I missed him so much.

- _ -don't miss me, Sarah. He chuckled at me. Little girl, why should you mourn your enemy? _

-

You are not my enemy!

My people-

I drowned him out with my outcry. I'm your people, Udrak, you and I know that! We're all we have!

You have Aximili and the Animorphs now. You can't have me anymore.

No! Udrak, please! Please!

He laughed at me again. Sarah.... dear, dear Sarah.... let go. There is no point of holding onto what you cannot grasp.

Why do you have to die? Why? Why you can't stay with me? I need you!

You don't, not anymore.... grow up, Sarah.

Udrak!

â€|grow up, Sarah. You're on your own, you know what to do.

But... but I don't... Udrak, what will I do without you?

You know what you'll do... you idiot. You'll go on without me. This isn't an enemy you can defeat.... I am dying... live with the fact that you can't stop me.

But-

But nothing! You're young, Sarah. You'll adapt.

We can adapt-

-

_ Sarah. _There is no more 'we'_. Only you. Farewell, Sarah. _

- -

_ He was so final. So certain. He hadn't been so certain in so long. Goodbye, I whispered_-

Ahhhhhhhhhh! I screamed. I threw back my head and bared my teeth in complete frustration. Why is this _happening_?!

What was happening was obvious. For some reason, I was still able to remember things with the same clarity as when Udrak was there to help me. But, for some reason, three weeks after he died, I wasn't able to control it anymore. I hadn't _wanted_ to remember anything since he died, because to do that would make me miss him even more. Now, for a reason I didn't understand and couldn't see, things I was doing were triggering memories. They weren't random: the memories had to do with things I was doing. I had been thinking about the time I "met" Udrak when I had the first flashback; I remembered the sense of being manipulated, of being lost, from seven years ago when Cassie had brought me into the sterile halls behind the Gardens' exhibits; I had remembered thinking about the cheetah's instincts when I subconsciously realized that they were controlling me; and, when I dwelt on how much I missed him, I had remembered how Udrak chose to say goodbye.

Something about that last part bothered me in a way I couldn't quite understand. Something wrong with it. But how? Something about it didn't make sense, but what?

For a moment, I considered the thought that the Ellimist - a semi-omnipotent being able to warp time and reality in order to play a sort of game with the universe against a creature known as Crayak - might be manipulating me, making this happen so that I would do something to help it. Immediately I dismissed that idea. It wasn't the Ellimist's style. It wasn't like them to be so... discreet.

Perhaps Crayak was trying to harm me in some way? Crayak was definitely more subtle than the Ellimist. That, too, I disregarded as illogical. These flashes of déjà vu weren't dangerous. Distracting, yes, and disturbing, but not really hostile in any way.

Then what was happening?

What was happening to me?

CHAPTER 3

"Your cortex is a little more active than it should be," Mia told me, "but otherwise there's nothing unusual."

"But it _is_ unusual," I insisted, sitting up. "What I do makes me flash back to memories that are clearer than they have the right to be! How is that _not_ unusual?"

I cannot believe I didn't mention Mia when I said that Cassie and Aximili are as close to best friends as I have. That is not true. Mia may act like my nursemaid sometimes, but she's my best friend, too - in a different way. She's sort of like a replacement sister, even though she's nothing like Kelly.

Two weeks ago, I belonged to what looked like a perfectly wonderful family. A mom, a dad, an older brother, a twin sister. Now my parents

and sister are dead. Matt, my brother - goodness knows where and how he is. I can only hope he's safe.

Still, losing my family seems trivial compared to the loss of Udrak. When Udrak died, half of who I was died too. The other half has had to go on without the Udrak half, and it's been hard. Dealing with that loss has kind of shoved aside the need to deal with the loss of my family.

Mia is of a race known as the Chee, a group of canine-like android creatures built centuries ago by a race known as the Pemalites. The Pemalites are long dead, wiped out by invasion and plague, but the Chee remain, quite real and quite human in some ways. They live on Earth, passing off as humans through the use of complicated forcefield and holographic technology far more advanced than anything humans, Yeerks, or Andalites will come up with for a few more hundred centuries or so.

Mia had ended her current human life - that of a woman who "lived" to be eighty-three - a week before the Chee decided to take me in, to give me a home. She decided to use her freedom from a human life to see that I'm happy. She's also a bit of a neat freak, which can be annoying sometimes, but she means well. Mia honestly cares about what happens about me. The people who do are so few and far between that I have to cherish those that do far more than the Louvre cherishes its entire collection of art masterpieces.

You'd be surprised how easy that is to do. Cherish people like that, I mean.

Mia frowned a little. Frowning Chee look a little strange, because most of them have short muzzles. There's some variation between the design of Chee, but most look a lot alike. Mia's different because, for some reason, she has one ear that curves over, like a normal dog's, and one that looks sheered off, so that what little remains of it stands straight up, because the curved part no longer exists. Her real name is Chee-Myani, but I call her Mia for short. She doesn't mind. "There's only one thing I can think of," she said. "It's not a nice thought."

"Mia, don't protect me," I told her flatly. I swung my legs over the side of the flat examination table. The small room we were in had a definite veterinarian's office feel-

-_except that the main table was a lot bigger - the size of a dining room table for ten people. There were the syringes, the little refrigerator, the cages - also much bigger - the smell of disinfectant, urine, and fur. On the table was a cat. It was about five feet long, with lean, almost gawky legs and short claws. Its long tail - the tail was as long as the creature was tall - hung limply off the end of the table. Its fur was a tawny orange-gold, covered in small, solid spots of black. Its eyes were not overly large and a darker orange-gold than its fur: it had a thin ring of black around each eye. The "mascara" markings looked as if they had run, as black lines ran from the corner of the animal's eyes down to its mouth, framing an equally black nose. It wasn't overly impressive, this animal. It was small, no bigger than Cassie_-

"Agh!"

Mia looked at me sharply. "Did it happen again?" I nodded, holding my forehead in my hand. "How far back did you regress?"

"This afternoon. At the Gardens." I rubbed my temple with one finger, as if to rub away the terrible sensation of losing my sanity. "What's your theory, Dr. Dog?"

Mia sighed. She crossed her odd, dog-foreleg-like arms, which made her look even more odd. Try to imagine a dog that can stand on its hind legs for extended periods of time, crossing its forelegs. "Udrak was in your head almost non-stop for seven straight years, am I correct?"

I nodded again. "He only left to absorb Kandrona rays - except for the last day, when he was in and out of various heads for awhile."

Mia nodded. "I think - don't quote me on this, but... I think you might be going through a delayed withdrawal."

"A what? Use English, Mia."

"I am." Her shoulders sunk lower, a sure sign she was going to explain her thoughts as simply as she could - not always an easy thing, considering that Chee are possibly the most advanced computers on the face of the Earth.

Forget "possibly". They are the most advanced anything on the face of the Earth.

"Human bodies are very susceptible to addictions," she began slowly.

"What?" I interrupted, jumping to my feet. "You're saying-"

"Let me finish, Sarah," Mia said. She unfolded her arms to point at the table. "Sit. Listen."

"Do I get a nummy if I do?" I asked with a lopsided grin.

She smiled a little. "I'll give you a present if you do."

"Yay - new squeaky toy!" I boosted myself back on the table, turning serious again.

Mia was serious again, too. "Human bodies are very susceptible to addictions," she started over. "When humans ingest something for a long period of time - painkillers, caffeine, even vitamin pills - their bodies tend to create a homeostatic balance to absorb that input." Seeing my confusion, she chose another way of wording her thoughts. "Their bodies become used to that stimulus, whether it's a cup of coffee in the morning or going to bed at a certain time, and adjusts to work best when the routine goes unchanged.

"However, sometimes people have to change their lifestyles. Daylight savings time throws many people's biological clocks completely off-track, so that missing one hour of sleep makes it feel like they missed an entire night. When someone used to coffee in the morning doesn't have time for it several days in a row, they start going

through a withdrawal."

"So you're saying my body adapted to work most efficiently with Udrak, and now that he's gone far longer than I'm used to, I'm starting to get quirks in my system."

"Pretty much. In most Controllers, the withdrawal symptoms are an inability to control bodily functions, from lack of practice. They tend to shake a lot. Slurred voice. They share many of the same symptoms as people who suffer strokes, or comas." Mia frowned again. "But you and Udrak were a special case. The symptoms were bound to be different. I'm just surprised they took this long to surface."

"Is this going to affect me farther?" I asked. "Am I going to start forgetting what's past and what's present? Am I going to start acting out what I'm remembering? Am I going to get the shakes?"

"There's no way of knowing," Mia said. "Yours is a unique case, Sarah. You just have to ride it out."

I hit the table with my fist. "I don't want to ride it out. I want to at _least_ know when I don't have to worry about it affecting me anymore! What I _really_ want is to know when it'll _end_!"

"I'm sorry, Sarah. We're not even sure why you morph and acquire things wrong."

"Could... could that be related?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do... do you think I might have... had an allergic reaction to the Escafil Device?"

Mia shook her head. "Impossible. There's nothing to be allergic _to_, Sarah. An allergy wouldn't affect speed, and wouldn't give you a tingling sensation when you acquire things. An allergy would simply make you sick."

"Sick? How so?"

"The only real allergy you could have to an Escafil Device is if outside DNA from things you acquire managed to escape into your body - or if that DNA was attacked by your immune system. Either way, it'd be treated like any other foreign body. You'd get sick, then accumulate antibodies, and eventually lose the ability to morph. Probably no different from a common cold - besides the 'losing the ability to morph' part."

I sighed. My shoulders slumped forward, and I hung my head, closing my eyes. "This just scares me, Mia. I don't like not being able to control my own mind, what I remember. Not even Yeerks steal the ability to choose what you think about. Not even _they_ have that power." I shuddered. "Mia, I don't want to lose my mind," I said, looking at her, desperate to be told exactly what I knew she'd say.

"Sarah, you're _not_ losing your mind," she said. She walked right up to me and hugged me tightly. "It's just a little more out of order than usual."

I chuckled in spite of myself. "Thanks, Mia."

She let me go. "Now you're going to be all right - right?"

I couldn't say no. Mia would just get more worried about me. She worries too much as it is. But I couldn't say yes: Mia would see right through me. So I changed the subject. "Can I have my nummy now?" I asked, smiling slightly.

Mia chuckled. "Go to your room, young lady. I want to show you something."

CHAPTER 4

My room is pretty plain. The reason is simple: when I became an Animorph, my former life came to a screeching crash-and-burn. I know that's mixing metaphors, but "screeching halt" isn't good, since it didn't really end - I'm still alive - and "crash-and-burn" doesn't quite work alone.

Simply put, here's how it was. Udrak killed my mother when the Yeerk within her tried to kill me. At that time he was so far gone that all he was thinking about was keeping me safe - who he had to hurt to do it was irrelevant by then. When my father's Yeerk failed to capture me when he led the search party sent to do so, that failure led to Aximili and I making a complete fool of Esplin - I mean, Visser Three. When my father's slaver suffered for that, my father died. My twin sister, Kelly-Ann, was killed so that I could not try to pass myself off as being her. My brother, Matt - the only one of us, it seems, that wasn't a Controller (as Udrak and I had been equally unaware of the fact that my parents had become infested) - is currently out-of-state. And will remain that way, if he knows what's good for him. At least, he was out-of-state last I saw him, which was a long time ago.

I pressed my hand on the wall behind the hologram butterfly, where the opening switch to my door was hidden. Just to the left of it, the hidden door slid open. I stepped through, and Mia followed me.

The first thing very strange about my room is the amount of shelf space. I mean, except for the far walls, there are shelves everywhere. That's because, originally, it'd been a storage closet. A fifteen-foot-square storage closet, but still, a closet is a closet.

The second is the bed. You know those wicker doggy beds they sell in pet stores, the one with the big red cushion in it? Change the wicker to a silvery metal, and make the bed six and a half feet at its longest diameter, four feet at the shortest, and two and a half feet high. That is my bed. It is shockingly comfortable. It came with a matching chair - two feet at the shortest diameter, two and a half feet at the longest, and two feet high, with a base that tapers inward, then outward again, like an hourglass.

Third is, as I said, the emptiness of it. No pictures, no posters, no trophies, not even a thermostat. The shelves are empty.

No - they weren't entirely empty anymore. I heard Mia shut the door behind her. Now, a reading lamp was installed above my bed, so I

didn't have to have the overhead lighting on. It wasn't really a necessary thing: it was just something I'd had at home and had sort of missed. A pot of black-eyed susans and daisies - my absolute favorite flowers - sat on a shelf right next to the door, and beside the pot was a small bottle of water. A smaller pot of violets sat on a shelf next to one of the window-screens. The window-screens are waifer-thin, rectangular things with rounded corners. One is on the left wall, the other on the far wall. The one on the left can either show a view from any of Ereks windows, or I can watch any TV station in the world. The other can show a view from either Ereks back door or front door - I can hear his doorbell if I want to -, or grant me access to the Chees absolutely unimaginably huge database. I have my own private area in the database, where I've been saving a diary and stuff. I also put "homework" - assignments from Chee-Veedric, my self-appointed tutor who preferred being called "Brian" - there so no one can bug me about it before it's done. The database has Internet access, telephone lines, even a retractable keyboard so I can type out my "homework" if I don't want to use the voice-interface.

Still more work had been done. I saw that a bunch of hardcovers by Mark Twain, my absolute favorite author, had been placed on the top of my foldaway dresser. I looked at the titles - The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Pudd'nhead Wilson, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and, to my delight, The Prince and the Pauper - a book I've always wanted to read. A shelf above the dresser had more recent paperbacks - a few volumes titled The Incarnations of Immortality by Piers Anthony, a series I'd only read the first book to and had regretted never finishing: Watership Down, by Richard Adams, and The Cay, by Theodore Taylor, my absolute favorite books: and others that looked mostly like science-fiction and fantasy. The shelf beside it had some textbooks - Modern World History, Mathematics, The Best of Classic English Literature, Life Science and Biology, Fundamental History of the United States, World History... I took a closer look at the book squeezed between World History and the wooden bookend. It was a small, paperback book. I pulled it off the shelf to make sure I was reading the title right.

The First Pet History of the World, by David Comfort.

Chuckling, I put it back. "You did this?" I asked Mia.

"Not completely me. Veedric and Ereks helped. You did too." I looked at her out of the corner of my eye. "Remember how you told me the password to your diary and said you-

- "really don't care if you look," I told her. "What are you going to see? How long it took me to brush my teeth? What wetsuit I wore today? Besides, that way, I'm less likely to confuse you"-

- -

"-n't care if I took a peek?"

I rubbed my forehead, trying to appear as if it was just a headache. "Yes, that's what I said. And I meant it." I did. I knew Mia would never let anyone else see it. "This is wonderful, Mia. Thank you." I went to the dresser and pressed the fourth draw with my fingertips. The dresser reared up, pushing the top three drawers back and the fourth forward, so that the fourth was displayed right in front of me. I pulled out a pair of jeans from it, and pulled it over my

bathing suit. I then pressed the sixth drawer with my toe; that drawer raised up to waist level. I pulled out a button-down shirt and slipped it over the bathingsuit, but didn't close it. I pressed my fingertips to the side of the drawer in front of me for a few seconds; the dresser folded in on itself. I pressed the top drawer; the cover slid aside. From that I took a pair of socks and closed the drawer again. Slipping these on, I finally felt decent.

"Anyway, this isn't what I wanted to show you."

"There's more?" I asked, startled. "Isn't making my life more livable enough for you? What other kindnesses do you have to lay on me?"

Mia smiled at my cynicism. "Oh, stop it. Here." She held out a flat, round... thing.

"A cup coaster?" I took the thing. It was about four inches across and perfectly round - a half-inch-high cylinder. It really did look like one of those coasters you put a cup on to keep it from damaging a wooden table. It was an odd, powdery gray-blue in color.

"Think 'open'," she instructed me patiently.

Open, I thought.

I yelped as a small hologram appeared from the coaster-thing. I saw myself, dressed in my wetsuit/normal morphing suit, an off-black thing with turquoise and magenta stripes at the shoulders, arms, and legs. I looked angry, determined, and not quite as overweight as I do in normal photographs. The image made me look five inches tall, though, which might account for the discrepancy. The object of my obvious aggravation was a young, six-inch-tall Andalite, his tail arched high in the air, one hand clenched into a fist, the other raised in front of him. His weight seemed to rest heavily toward his left hind leg, as if he'd just stepped backwards.

-feeling confused and frightened as the full extent of what had happened suddenly hit me. I don't know what to do! I cried. I'm no prince! _

_ _

_ "Well, you are now," Sarah snapped, her eyes narrowing. "It's up to you, Ax. I don't know how to work that thing, and personally I'd rather leave it where it is. But the others are in trouble, and as far as my life and my world is concerned they're the best hope for both. They're your friends, Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill! What would they want you to do!"_-

I jerked in surprise. The projector fell to the floor. The picture blurred as it hit the floor, but otherwise it was fine. "Oh no," I whispered.

Mia was at my elbow in an instant. "What is it?"

"I just remembered again," I said. "But... it didn't happen to me."

"What? What do you mean?"

I shuddered, looking down at the hologram. "How did you get that?"

She pointed downward at the oblong rug beneath our feet. "This isn't a rug. It's a large holoprojector. It also records with simple thought- commands, same as the smaller projector opens and closes."

"I looked at that... and I remembered what happened. I remembered Aximili and I arguing."

"I was in the room, you remember," she said, smiling faintly. "As an experiment, I told the projector to take a split-second shot."

"And I thank you," I said. "But I didn't remember the fight from my viewpoint." Mia looked confused. "Mia, I remembered it as Ax saw it. I could see myself. I was a mess. That burn on my head looked as nasty as it felt."

"Hmm." Mia looked thoughtful. "Does it seem to you that the flashbacks tend to be getting closer and closer to now?"

I shook my head. "In the cheetah morph, I remembered minutes before. The memory of Aximili and I... that happened three weeks ago."

Mia frowned. "That's the only one that doesn't fit the pattern."

"Yeah, but it screws it up enough that the theory doesn't work." She scowled in agreement. I sighed. "But I just have to live with this, right? Until it ends. It had better end soon." Mia nodded, but didn't say anything. "So... how's my other project coming?"

Mia smiled slightly. "The box will be done within the next hour."

I nodded. "Good. Then I'd better get my guest. If he'll come, of course. And if he's still alive."

Mia squeezed my elbow before moving away. "Good luck. I'm proud of you."

"Yeah," I said ruefully. "You would be." I sighed, blowing my hair off my forehead. "But, man oh man, the others are going to kill me if they ever find out about this."

CHAPTER 5

I don't like secrets. That's why I got so ticked off, back when I acquired the hawks and everyone tried to act like nothing was wrong. Secrets don't belong among allies in a war. Secrets are the simplest and stupidest way to get killed.

I hate secrets.

But what I had to do, before I could consider myself an Animorph, had to be a secret. I couldn't be an Animorph if it wasn't done, but, if the others found out... well, then I wouldn't be an Animorph, either.

I'm pretty sure I'll never really be an Animorph. Cassie, Jake, Marco, Rachel, Tobias - those are the Animorphs. Aximili's considered "the Andalite". Me, I'll probably always be "the Controller", or "the new kid".

But to be able to live as an Animorph under Marco's generic definition of the term - "a kid with: a) the ability to turn into animals, and b) a serious death wish" - there was something I simply had to do, something the others could never find out about.

After saying good-bye to Mia and changing into my normal wetsuit (I'm kinda modest; I don't like walking around in a bathing suit, and, besides, where I was going, the foot-parts of the wetsuit, no matter how thin they are, were going to help), I left the underground Chee lair and, exiting through Ereka's front door, climbed the tallest tree in his front yard. A girl climbed the tree, but ten seconds later a brown hawk flew out. Anyone watching might think the girl scared the bird. I hope no one noticed that the girl in the wetsuit never climbed back out.

I flew a long time, right out to the coast. I landed there to rest, high on the sheer cliffs. The hawk didn't like it, because it was the kind of place larger hawks and eagles liked to live; what I didn't like was having to control the hawk's instincts. Now I had an idea of what Udrak had gone through, the first time he entered my brain, but there was no reassuring the hawk: I had to suppress it. It was neither easy nor pleasant-

- I didn't want to see anymore; hiding in a hidden corner of my mind, I did curl up into that ball, and refused to look at what was happening to me_-

I spread my wings; I only had an hour's morphing time left. I used the cliffs to get as much altitude as I could, letting the warm thermals carry me up, before turning away from land entirely and heading "out to sea", as the saying goes.

As I flew, a new memory came to me.

- underwater. So deep. So many miles! Trapped!_

-

I'm here, I said to the amplifier device, keeping my voice as calm as possible, in spite of my increasing panic. The dome could not take so much pressure much longer! I am here. I cannot survive much longer. If you hear me... come. If you hear me... come. I turned off the amplifier. Where are you, Elfangor? I demanded of no one-

-

I shuddered in-flight, taking a little dip.

I wasn't being stupid, flying out over the ocean; I wasn't really going out that far, just to a small, rocky island about a mile off the coast. As I flapped the last few yards, my hawk counterpart began sighting a great deal of rats, along with a seagull or two. It was the right place.

- _ Rachel? I said, hesitant, not sure if she wished to speak yet, if at all._

-

Yeah?

-

_ I think... I phrased my words carefully, to use as few as possible. The horror of what I'd done was truly, as humans say it, "blood-chilling". I think I will never want to speak of this again_-

Besides, I'd known where I was going. Aximili had known, so then I did, too. I knew a lot of what he knew. Udrak had given it to me when he died.

I landed and demorphed. The sharp stones stabbed at the thin layer of synthetic material that made up the "sole" of the foot-parts of the wetsuit; no matter what Marco might say, what I got on my feet isn't much better than nothing at all. (Not that I'm going to _tell_ him that.) I stood up straight, getting a claustrophobic feeling as I looked around; nothing but ocean surrounding less than a hundred square feet of rocks and scraggly trees. The tallest trees were barely taller than I am, and I'm not exactly tall - taller than Cassie and Marco, maybe, but, still, not very tall.

"David?" I called. I stood still, breathing slowly, listening. But I wasn't listening with my ears; I was concentrating, clearing my mind, _listening_. Not to the rustles of the rats, the cawing of gulls, or the constant murmur and rolling of the ocean, but for what I was expecting, what I knew had to be here. It _had_ to be.

It was only because I was listening for it that I could tell it from the constant sound of the ocean. It was a slightly different sound, inconsistent and higher pitched, but it wasn't really a sound at all.

In my mind, someone was sobbing.

"David!" I called again. "I need to talk to you!"

There was a rustling at my feet. A rat, its tail kinked in two places, its left ear gone and right slightly shredded, stumbling on at least one lame leg and against its somewhat scarred hide, sat in front of me. It looked up at me. Then it stood upon its hind legs, and bared its teeth.

Go away, a voice said. Go away, or I'll kill you.

I stared at the disfigured rat for a long time, shocked. What had been happening, to make him look like _that_? "My name is Casey-Sarah, David," I said. "I have an offer to make you."

The mangled rat regarded me for a long time. Its kinked tail flicked sharply, and I swear the creature leered at me. So, they did it again, the voice said. Better run while you can, _Casey-Sarah_, it sneered at me. There's a great many other prisons they can lock you in, worse than mine. One wrong move, and Rachel'll have you stuck in

the worst morph you have. Just you wait.

I thought about the grasshopper I'd acquired. I barely managed to suppress a shudder. "I didn't come here to gloat, David," I said. "I have something you might want."

The rat sat up straighter; its scarred nose wiggled. The box? David's voice was now desperate, excited, like Udrak had been in begging for my life. But this was a different desperation - not of the need to protect, but the need to have.

I frowned. I knew the box I had in mind for him, and the box he wanted, were two very different things - even though I did have both. "David, if you ever were to regain the morphing technologically, and morphed anything one molecule smaller than you are now - if one electron of your rat-self entered Z-space, it would cause a Z-space paradox. There would be two sets of 'David' matter in separate places in Z-space. They would attract each other. The snapping effect is like pulling a rubberband three ways - one point what there is of you in Z-space now, the second portion in Z-space, and you in normal space. Since two of the points are in Z-space, you'd end up there faster than you could pluck a whisker off your nose."

So you're saying you don't have it, David snapped.

"David, if you have a death wish, I can just as easily shove you in a meat grinder. It would be infinitely less painful."

Point taken, David snarled. Now get out of here. There's nothing else I want.

"Look at yourself! What there is left of you is coming apart at the seams!" I swallowed heavily. I didn't like this rat. Still, what had to be done had to be done. "Wouldn't you like to get off here yourself?"

The rat cocked its head slightly to the side, trying to see me better. What?

I swallowed again, and took a deep breath. "My family is dead, David. They had been Controllers - I had been, too. But my Yeerk, their Yeerks, them - they're all dead. There's just me."

Forgive me for not crying in sympathy, David sneered. Hope you find the hayloft more comfortable than I did.

"The others have found me a safe house," I interrupted. My patience was being whittled away by his bitterness. It was all I could do not to copy his insolent tone and begin to outright bicker with him. I wasn't going to let me fall to his level. I straightened my shoulders. "I want you to come with me."

The rat's lips fell, and it blinked. I forced myself not to smile at his confusion. You what?

I sighed. "David, I am going to be an Animorph. But to be one, I have to give you this chance. To get out of here, to live indoors again. To be safe."

Why. The tone was flat, more of a demand than a question.

"Because it isn't right."

David laughed harshly. Right? Don't talk to me about right. Jake tried that. Ask him where it got him.

"My Yeerk entered Ax, then returned to me," I said flatly. "I don't have to ask. I know that you tried killing them. You thought that, with them out of the way, you could go home and everything would be normal again." I snorted. "David, nothing but that makes me feel sorry for you. 'If I could just defeat those who were hurting me, everything could be as it was.' That's what you were thinking, wasn't it? You know, I thought that way once." I crouched down to be closer to David's eye level. "But that was seven years ago, David. Do you have any idea how young I was? I was an idiot. Maybe I have no right to say this, because I got experience earlier with life-

Don't you mean in life? he leered. You talk a lot, Casey-Sarah. You're just like Marco - all talk.

"That's Sarah to you," I said. "And I do mean with life, David." I forced my voice to remain neutral. "The simple truth is, there's no such thing as 'normal' in life. You can't go back to normal because you were never there to begin with. I only have two words for you, friend. Someone very dear to me gave them to me, and now I'm going to pass them on to you."

Get on with it.

"Grow up." His beady rat eyes narrowed. "Are you coming or not?"

I swear, he frowned. He was considering. Would I live in a cage?

"I told my benefactors what I was doing. They're building the most posh cage this side of the Skrit Na homeworld."

The sneer returned. If you want to free me, why bring me back? Tobias will have me for breakfast.

"I wasn't talking about the Animorphs. I'm not stupid. I'm talking about the things I'm living with. Allies. Inhuman allies."

You want to put me in a cage, he said, his tone accusing.

"You and I both know you can never be free so long as the fight goes on. You're a traitor, David. No matter how well you meant by it, you're still a selfish, immature traitor. I'm just offering to be a kinder warden than Mother Nature. It's your choice, David."

The rat stared at me with cold eyes far too intelligent, even for a rat, his better ear twitching every few seconds, but David did not answer me for a long time.

Finally, he gave me his answer.

Does it get cable? he asked.

CHAPTER 6

Mia greeted me when I came back, with David in hand. Literally.

"Oh, good, you found him," she said, relieved. "I was worried."

About who? David leered at her. He fell silent as the first dog approached, curious of the scents I'd brought with me - not to mention the rat.

"Why, you, of course!" Mia chided him. "Sarah can take care of herself - generally speaking. It would be decidedly more difficult for you, as a rat, to do the same."

"Thanks, David," I told him, raising him closer to my face for two reasons: one, to use a stage whisper that befitted what I was going to say, and two, to see if he would turn on me. "If I came in alone, I'd never have heard Mia make a lame attempt to convince me she doesn't worry. It's not everyday Mia attempts a lame excuse."

"It's not in my programming," Mia replied tartly. She put her paw-like hands on her metallic hips. "Excuse me for worrying, then!"

"You're excused," I replied easily. "Is it ready?"

"Right in your room, just as you asked," Mia replied. "Made it a new shelf and everything."

"You're a dear, Mia." I gave her a hug around her narrow shoulders with one arm, then rubbed her head. "Good dog."

"Go away," she said good-naturedly, then left us - or, I should say, left me to wade through an ocean of curious dogs wanting to sniff me over while I carried a quaking David to my room.

I shooed a lapdog mutt out from under my "bed" before shutting the door to my room. It hadn't changed much since I was gone - although the pot of violets was now on its side, and there was a squeaky toy in the corner. Obviously, I'd forgotten to close my door. Or, at least, someone had. I made sure it was closed this time.

I dropped David on the bed, and walked to the left wall ("left" meaning left-when-looking-in-from-the-doorway). It was dominated by several shelves, only two of which wasn't empty. One had, on the edge, the holo-picture Mia had taken of Aximili and I arguing. Behind it sat the Escafil Device - a small, blue box that contains the technology that allows people to morph. The open hologram hid it from David's view; I was happy he hadn't seen it. That box was the one he wanted. Badly.

The other shelf - a new one, about waist-high - with something on it held up a far larger box, one that was two feet by two feet at the base, and four feet high, so that it towered over me. Knowing the specifications I'd asked for, I ran my fingers up the edge of the forward right corner. A foot from the bottom my finger pressed inward on the hidden catch, and a small door slid aside right in the middle of the forward face. I turned around, and was half surprised to see that David had remained on the bed. I had almost expected him to try to bolt, although doing that would have been pointless.

You live with dog androids, he accused me.

"Very guilty," I affirmed. "Ones capable of helping the others and me considerably. Ones I could not tell you about until I knew for certain that you couldn't change your mind."

You are a suspicious, cruel, Rachel-ish witch, he sneered. "Witch" wasn't his word. Maybe this won't be so bad. His sarcasm cannot be described in any human language.

I gestured to the tall box. "Your box."

With difficulty David say up on his hind legs; the bed was so soft, balance wasn't exactly a walk in the park. That, he said flatly.

Perhaps I should explain. If two feet by two feet by four feet isn't your normal build for a rat cage, neither is the fact that the walls were solid, a sort of off-black, metallic color with a dull, glassy gloss.

"If the Chee did this like I asked them to," I answered his understated question, "you won't mind this box." I went to the bed, put out my hand, and laid it a foot away from David. "I'll show you."

David glared at me. How do I know I can trust you?

"I know I can't trust you. But, frankly, you don't have a choice. Come here, or I open the door and let all my friends the poochies in." I pointing meaningfully at the easily-retractable object that was all that kept the dogs outside from ravaging my room.

You're all the Animorphs rolled into one, he sneered at me. His bravado was quickly getting old. Jake's love of right, Rachel's wonderful sense of justice, Marco's mouth, and Tobias' attitude.

"Oh, and what about Cassie and Aximili?" He glared at me. "You're almost right, you know. I share morals with Jake. I share Marco's sense of humor as well as Rachel's urge for action. I don't know about Tobias' 'attitude' - I'd like to think I share the loss of my home as our bond - same as with you and me." David made a low, strange noise in his throat - I think it was meant to be a snort of disgust. It came out as a mixture of a squeak and a grunt. I ignored it. "With Aximili and I, it's Udrak. No, I'm not going to explain that statement. With Cassie... Cassie and I don't like suffering. I'm just too blunt to be as good as avoiding it as she is."

She was the one who got me trapped! he snarled at me. His jagged teeth snapped at my hand. The only thing that saved me from injury was that I'd been waiting for that move since he'd come out of the underbrush. In spite of his small size, that rat had pretty nasty teeth. She planned the entire thing! I sighed, rolling my eyes. I crossed my arms and generally did my best to look disinterested. He didn't take the hint. If it weren't for her, I'd be free! Human! I'd be-

"Are you going to rant all day?" I interrupted. "Because, if you are, I'd like you to get in your box and settled in so you can rant all

you want, to whoever you want, for as long as you want, and can leave me to my own life." He glowered at me with a beady, killing look. "Oh, just stop it. Now get over here, stop being a pain in the butt, and I'll show you your new home."

He glared at me again. There was no need for a verbal retort with that glare. I held out my hand again. He regarded it. You're tense, he said.

"I have an aversion for bites. But I survived a Labrador. Don't think a little bite like yours is going to keep you from going in that box."

He bared his teeth a little - a rat reaction -, then lowered his lip and climbed onto my hand. I carried him across the room. As a test, I rubbed between his ears with one finger, rubbing a spot on his head that was probably hard to scratch. He jerked in surprise, but didn't say anything. With both hands, I dumped him head-first into the box and shut the door. Then I moved to stand in the center of the rug-like graphics emitter-slash- holoprojector-slash-recording device. I gave it a simple thought-command, one of the ones Mia had taught me. Project to box.

The air shimmered around me as the surrounding force field kicked in, then blurred as the holographic imaging pixels - nano-scopic bits of color, from my limited understanding - began fixing themselves on the forcefield, into a coherent picture.

The landscape was amazingly real, and yet completely fake. Below me was sandy-colored dirt, above me was a medium blue sky, but beyond that - nothing. No trees, no grass, no bugs, no birds, no clouds, no wind, no sun. The mix of no clouds and no sun was extremely unnerving.

Actually, it wasn't that there was nothing.

It was just that David wasn't ready yet.

So far, the holographic pixels had a general human outline, a bland, featureless, three-dimensional gingerbread man. I had known that I wouldn't see the rat, but I'd expected the pixels to work faster at building David's default representation.

As I watched, the top of the gingerbread man's head turned pale yellow, and mittens grew out of his arms, which suddenly grained elbows. The mittens became gloves as feet grew from his legs. The gloves became hands as the boots became sneakers and a nose appeared on his flat face. Ears, eyes, and mouth appeared next, and the eyes turned dull brown. The yellow portion of his head began to crack into countless strands of blond hair, and his still featureless body turned white and blue. The white became a tee-shirt while the blue turned into jeans. Laces appeared on the sneakers. Eyelashes appeared.

I was struck by how much David looked like my cousin Tommy (Tom is the name of Jake's brother, I know, by my cousin Tommy is a very different Tom). Tommy, the last time I saw him - about four months ago - was a bratty, obnoxious seven-year-old with way too many action figures and a strange fear of Kelly and me (I think it was because we looked so much alike, yet were so different). David easily looked

twice Tommy's age, was one and a half times as tall, and had paler hair, but he still had the same obnoxious look to his face. He had that slight expression of someone used to getting their way, but with a certain amount of fear thrown in, the fear of someone bigger. David was, without a doubt in my mind, a classic example of a coveting worm who never once in his life considered anything "his fault".

He looked at me with eyes that still had a sort of rat-ish beadiness to them. I doubted it was my imagination, or a quirk with the holographic pixels. "What is this?" he demanded. There was a lot of confusion in his voice, which died the moment he heard himself speak aloud.

"This," I said, gesturing around, "is the default setting."

The what?"

I forced myself not to smile. He wasn't much less obnoxious when he was confused, but at least he didn't seem as arrogant. "Welcome to your new home," I said. "I got this idea from watching Star Trek. You can thank Paramount Studios and the Chee for your current residence."

He simply stared at me. Then, slowly, understanding dawned on his expression. "A holodeck," he said.

"Holo_box_, actually, but it's the same concept revamped a little. Instead of interfacing with a computer, the box is programmed to simulate whatever any one occupant wishes to see or do. It also translates its occupant - you - into whatever form you desire. I hope I got your human form here to be somewhat what you looked like. I had to rely on Aximili's memories."

"The others know about this?"

I shook my head. "Just you, me, and the Chee."

"Why?"

I shrugged a little. "I can't explain it so you'd understand. I don't understand completely myself. It's one part justice, two parts conscience."

"Justice." He sounded unconvinced.

"What you did earned you a life sentence," I said. My own tone was cold. "You tried to kill two people."

"They weren't people. They were animals. Heck, one's been a bird for almost a year!"

"That bird was - and is - human still. And the other hadn't been an animal for ten minutes. You stalked a young woman."

"Rachel?" He laughed harshly. "She threatened my family! That's not stalking! That's revenge!"

"After you had threatened hers - both of them. You threatened her family in return, remember? But even if you hadn't, you still threatened her other family. Forget that she and Jake are cousins.

The Animorphs are_ family_, David. You threatened them. You tried to kill Tobias. If someone had pulled a gun on your mother, wouldn't you be mad? Vengeful? What do you think Rachel felt when you bashed Ax with a bat, or mauled Jake, or when she thought you'd killed Tobias?" He didn't answer. "But, forget even that. You have two counts of attempted manslaughter and stalking. That'd get you a few years in jail and quite a few restraining orders besides. But you're not sorry you did it, David. That makes you deserve your prison. But I think being a rat is prison enough. Your life is going to be short. You're going to die of old age - if you live a good, long rat life - not long after you'd be getting out of college. If you forget you're a rat in here, that's perfectly fine, but it's entirely your loss. Whether or not you fool yourself is beyond my power and not my concern."

David chuckled. It was a nervous sound. "You sound like my grandmother."

"I guess I've grown up." He frowned. "The use of the box is simple. The box configures things as best as it can according to your commands. What you don't tell it, it randomly fills in. Like, if you wanted a representation of, say, Marco, and didn't know the color of his eyes, or how long his hair is, it'd fill it in and you can change it if you want to. It's memory is several thousand times greater than your average Gameboy - you want Marco back after a year, you'll get the same exact Marco, unless you're letting time pass as normal, and then he'll be a year older. It's a genius device. _Better_ than a holodeck. Works on thought, and acts upon real people too." I thought _lion_, _sitting_. Immediately my view of myself - just a representation of what David would see were he standing at my perspective - disappeared, and I saw a ring of straw-colored fur around my peripheral vision. Although I saw the changes, I felt nothing; the only forcefield in effect outside the box was the one I was using as a window into David's box. However, I knew that David now saw a lion sitting where I had been. I also knew that the lion had been David's power morph. David's eyes widened - _he_ knew I was making a point. I thought _unicorn_, and the mane disappeared. I couldn't see anything of myself, until I looked down, and saw silver hooves and white legs, like an albino Andalite. Smiling a little, I thought _bagel_. David's eyes widened even more, but then he burst out laughing. For the first time, it was an honest, nice sound, not harsh or nervous or grating in any way. _Normal_, I thought. I became visible to myself again, and to David, too. "I'm not in the box, in reality," I said. "I'm a hologram being generated from my room. A forcefield laden with holographic pixels lets me see you, interact with you, just as a hologram makes me look real."

David moved forward, walking in a stiff fashion to stand in front of me. I wasn't surprised that he was awkward; he kept expecting himself to be a rat again, when forcefields within the box made him feel very much human. Technology is never a perfect replacement for reality: it can't touch the psychological aspects reality truly has, except for the extremely weak. David wasn't weak enough to be fooled entirely.

David grabbed my hand in one of his - not roughly, not gently, but experimentally. He tried to move it, lift it up, and a confused look crossed his face. "I can feel you," he said. "I can feel your hand here, but it hasn't moved."

"Real people in the box cause something of a paradox," I explained. I didn't realize later that I had made a rhyme. "I'm represented by a hologram, and a forcefield makes me feel real, too. However, while the forcefield interacts directly with you, the hologram only does as I do - it is unaffected by anything you do." To relieve the oddity of the situation, I moved my hand close to where it should have been. I knew the forcefield, alerted to the movement, made a similar adjustment so that it and I took up the same space again. I didn't have to have known it would do that in advance; David's expression just as easily gave it away.

David looked down at our hands, then back up, glaring his eyes into mine.

He squeezed his hand. He squeezed so hard his arm quivered.

"You can't hurt me," I said, doing my best to keep my annoyance at his immaturity out of my voice. "Forcefields in effect here do not apply outside unless I want them to, and I just want to observe now. I could make myself invisible, cancel the forcefield you feel now, turn off the system that translates my voice into the sound system, and you wouldn't be able to know I was looking in on you at all. Still, you've provided a good start to an explanation of one of the downsides of the Chee building this box. Something I'll try to fix a bit, to make this more realistic."

"What?" he asked suspiciously, letting go of the forcefield representation of my hand.

I took my hand back, made a fist, and punched as hard as I could right into the bridge of his nose-

-and passed right through. My fist appeared out the back of his head. I retracted my arm. His shocked expression was amusing. "The Chee are incapable of violence. Their programming forbids them to allow other creatures to come to harm. Likewise, this box, programmed by them, cannot allow those who use it to come to harm."

"So you mean I can't get hurt?"

"I won't make it so you can kill yourself, David. But I'll see that if you bump your knee it'll hurt. If you fall down a flight of stairs you'll get bruised. That sort of thing. You'll thank me later."

He frowned a little. "Okay," he said finally.

"Any questions?"

He shrugged. "I'll figure it out."

I nodded, but inside I felt even more sour. I started to turn away. The ingrate didn't even have the courtesy to say-

"Sarah - it's Sarah, right?" I turned back to look at him. His expression was strange. Remorseful, almost. No less obnoxious, but... softer, somehow. "Thanks."

Slowly, ever so slowly, I smiled. "Yeah, it's Sarah. It was good to meet you, David." I turned around again, mentally shutting down the emitters. I was immediately back in my room - not that I'd ever left.

But it felt like I'd returned from the biggest test of my life.

Alone now, without anyone to see, I smiled a little smile. A smile of relief.

Perhaps there was hope for him after all.

CHAPTER 7

-_I ran through the fields of my scoop, just to run, not eating.... I just wanted to feel the wind in my face, pushing my stalk eyes back, letting my legs carry me wherever I wanted. I didn't want to think, to feel... just had to keep running_-

"Sarah?"

My head jerked up. "Oh, sorry. Spaced out a moment."

Marco smirked a little at that, but didn't say anything. Secretly, I was glad.

None of them knew just how "spaced out" I'd become in the last few days.

It'd been four days since I'd acquired the cheetah, and brought David back from his island. Four days of remembering things at the slightest outside stimuli. Just looking at Aximili made me dredge up his memories now. Over the last ninety hours or so, the flashbacks hadn't gotten easier to face - they'd gotten harder to ignore. I wasn't acting them out - thank goodness for that - but I just blanked out - stopped. The thing is, the extent to which I _stopped_ was increasing. Last night I suddenly awakened feeling choked after a particularly clear dream about sitting in the Yeerk pool, watching TV, while Udrak swam around and soaked up Kandrona rays. The dream lasted about two minutes, tops: I saw three commercials. But I started to feel choked, and woke up gagging.

I'd stopped breathing.

What was next? My heart? My brain?

How far was this stoppage going to go?

How removed from reality was I going to go?

I was trying to listen to Jake, honest. I just simply _couldn't_. Not completely, anyway.

"So, on to new business," Jake said. "Sarah, what do you know about these _othyb_ things Visser Three's getting?"

I forced myself to focus. I looked around the barn from where I was - perched precariously on a stall door. Concentrating on balancing helped keep my mind on the present.

Marco was laying, completely at ease, in a pile of hay, a piece of it in his mouth. Some was in his hair.

-_the soft, chilling wind made the dry grass ripple, as if we were

being stalked_-

I made a little hiccuping sound: I'd stopped breathing again, but only for a split second.

-_Sploosh! I was under without any air in my lungs_-

I clamped my teeth shut, and slipped off the stall door. Better to lose reality for a moment than lose my balance and break my neck. My eyes continued to scan the room, and they settled on Rachel, leaning against one of the rafter supports, her arms crossed.

-_"So what now?" Kelly asked us, crossing her arms. "How do we do it your way, Udrak?" We smiled grimly_-

- -

I looked up at Tobias next. Tobias, the _nothlit_. The boy trapped as a hawk.

-_"Ya, ya, live vid men. In shed; rabbits live in box in shed. Men pring food. You know?"_-

-

"I know this happens," said Hazel-

-

Okay, _that_ was new. I'd just remembered something from _Watership Down_, the book Tobias and I had read together about a week and a half ago - in fact, it was the same copy Mia had put on my shelf of books. I saw the words, but they were a little blurred; it had been drizzling that day, making it hard to see much of anything in the gloom.

- _blinded the flash of Dracon beams_-

-_mucky water stung my eyes, but fear kept them open_-

One thing that had become obvious was that the bouts of memory were getting shorter... and many returned to the original, the one where I relived getting infested for the first time.

I looked at Jake and Cassie; Jake didn't look much like a leader as he sat on a hay bale, hugging a goose as Cassie continued to put the plaster strips on its broken left leg, making a cast - he looked more like Cassie's assistant.

Finally I looked at Aximili. He was in a similar position as Rachel; I think he was trying to mimic her. Aximili uses every opportunity he can to learn more about humans, even if it means trying to imitate one of the rest of us when he doesn't think we're looking. He looked kind of glum; I felt bad, because I'd been avoiding him.

-_I felt strange. Tingly. I giggled. "Demorph. Dee, dee. That is a very pleasant mouth sound. Dee!"_-

-

"He's delirious!" Cassie said. I think it was Cassie.

The floor moved beneath me. Peculiar - I had thought the school was firmly rooted into the ground with primitive cement. Obviously I was wrong; the floor moved irratically, so that I could barely keep on my awkward two legs. "Another dee!" I said happily, even as the floor gave a surprising jerk-

-

Every once in a while, the memories weren't so short. But they took less time. They went by faster.

All those memories? Five seconds. Tops.

"No one knows much about the _othyb_," I said. "They were rumor. Less than rumor, really. The Yeerk equivalent to bogeymen. The majority of Yeerks don't believe they exist. Obviously, the majority is wrong, if Visser Three is getting his hands on some."

"_If_ he gets some," Marco said.

"You know Visser Three, Marco," I said, looking at him.

-"welcome to the Animorphs, new kid." I shook his hand_-

"He's _going_ to get some," I continued, keeping my voice smooth, allowing no sign of hesitation to show. "You wouldn't believe how it's got Mia upset."

"Mia?" Cassie echoed. She took the plaster-legged goose from Jake, who rubbed his hands on his jeans. She carried the goose back to its cage. "Why is she upset about it?"

"Mia's a sympathizer of the infiltrators, but not one herself," I explained. "Her last human life ended shortly before the Chee took me in. But she keeps up with what the infiltrators know, and what they know of the _othyb_ isn't much. No one has a high enough rank. If only Udrak were still alive...." I trailed off. There was no need to finish the thought. "I know he's been promised one - sub-Visser Nineteen."

"A sub-Visser?" Marco echoed. "Is that just under Visser status?"

I nodded. "Udrak had been sub-Visser Sixty-One. There's almost three times as many sub-Vissers as Vissers. Two hundred or so. Udrak's high rank was mostly thanks to his 'friendship' with Esplin, being his favorite brother and all, but sub-Visser Nineteen.... _every_ Yeerk worth Kandrona rays knows _his_ reputation."

"Which isâ€|?" Rachel asked.

I looked at Aximili. "Aximili knows, too."

Everyone looked at Aximili, who stood up a little straighter, a little surprised that I had turned the attention to him. "Yes, I have heard of sub-Visser Nineteen," he said. Then he was quiet again.

"Soâ€|?" Marco prompted.

Aximili pushed his lower lip out and blew his hair off his forehead. That surprised me. It wasn't a habit he had - it was one of mine! Where had he picked it up? Watching television, or watching me? "Sub-Visser Nineteen was posted in the space near my homeworld for two years. An entire sector was closed off to conventional space travel to prevent any vessel from encountering him."

"Why?" Rachel asked.

Aximili glanced at her, then sighed. "I have not been clear. In the first month of sub-Visser Nineteen's posting near the homeworld, he destroyed three squadrons of ships sent to destroy him. Sub-Visser Nineteen spread a reign of terror among our closest sectors."

"But he didn't take any Andalites for hosts?" Marco asked, confused.

I shook my head. "Sub-Visser Nineteen doesn't care about hosts," I told him. "He cared about bodycount."

"No Andalite knows what sub-Visser Nineteen looks like," Aximili said. "We only know that he is extremely large, and capable of flight."

"That's more than most Yeerks know," I added. "All most Yeerks know about sub-Visser Nineteen is that he is extremely efficient. No shots wasted, if you catch my meaning. His deathcount in battle is one-hundred percent - at least, for the enemy."

Aximili frowned, but he nodded at the same time. "No Andalite has survived long after a fight with sub-Visser Nineteen," he said softly.

"Then why isn't this guy a Visser?" Marco asked bluntly.

"No one knows," I said. "The Council of Thirteen must have a reason for it. They probably want to keep his rank low to keep him under control."

"So the power doesn't go to his head," Jake said.

"Exactly," I agreed.

"He has a bladeship," Aximili said.

"I thought only Vissers had bladeships!" Rachel exclaimed.

Aximili nodded again. "In most cases, yes. However, sub-Visser Nineteen was provided with a bladeship during the time he... 'haunted'... space near the homeworld. As far as I know, he still has it."

"Two bladeships?" Marco moaned. "That isn't good odds for us."

"So long as we remain on Earth we should be fine," I said. "They won't chance humans seeing-"

- _ Farewell, Sarah- _ _Images blurring, like a tape on rewind_-

-_ You don't, not anymore- More images, blurring together, too fast_-

-_ -my people- Too fast! Couldn't see_-

-_ -can't have me- _

- -

_ UDRAK! I screamed. NO! _-

I tried to sit up, but I was too dizzy. I didn't move at all. I couldn't even blink.

The barn. Six heads looking at me from above. Well, five from a few feet above, and one from the rafter far above. Actually, four were a few feet above me; Marco was only a few inches. As I watched, he leaned down and kissed me.

Except, when he did, he blew all the air in his lungs into mine in a way that was very uncomfortable.

"Hey!" I tried to say, but instead a gurgle emerged. A bomb went off in my head. My chest screamed in agony. Marco sat up quickly.

"Is she okay?" Cassie asked.

"Thank goodness for emergency first aid," Marco said. He leaned over me again.

"You do that again, I'll rip that grin off your face," I tried to say, even though I could barely concentrate and Marco wasn't grinning. Instead it came out, "Ya do tha gin, all urp th'gurn faya fos."

Marco smiled a little. "I was just going to ask if you were all right," he assured me. "Are you?"

"She sounds horrible," Rachel said. She sounded worried, too.

"That's because you went first," Marco said casually.

"Uh?" That was me.

Jake leaned down. "You just collapsed...." He glanced at his watch.

"Five minutes ago exactly," Aximili said.

"Only five minutes?" Cassie asked, sounding surprised. "It felt like an eternity!"

Jake frowned. "Five minutes ago," he finished. "You weren't breathing. No pulse, either. Rachel tried CPR for a few minutes, then Marco took over. And, thank God, you woke up."

"Thank God?" I echoed ruefully, smiling blearily. I almost sounded normal - just groggy, or smashed. My chest hurt - no doubt, from two people pounding on it. _I_ knew CPR, too, and how it works. The

pressing on the chest bone often breaks the bone when done properly for long enough. "Thank _you_."

"We'd better get you to the Chee," Cassie said. "Something's definitely wrong. People shouldn't just shut down-"

"Cassie." With Marco's help I sat up. My head pounded painfully. "Surely you know by now that I'm hardly a normal person."

"Have you been hiding something from us?" Rachel demanded.

"I didn't think it was important - that hadn't happened before."

"_What_ wasn't important?" Jake asked. He was using his quiet voice, the one that carried more weight than Rachel's loudest demand-voice. It was his you'd-better-give-me-an-answer-I'll-believe voice. He doesn't use it often, but when he does, watch out.

"Mia says it's withdrawal. From Udrak." I tried to get to my feet, but Cassie rushed forward and told me to relax. I told her the floor was dirty and cold. She moved away to get a blanket. "After seven years with him, and now so many weeks without, I've started having... seizures, I guess. It started with bouts of *dejà vu*. Then I'd stop breathing for moments at a time. Now..." I felt tears welling up in my eyes.

Five minutes.

I had been in cardiac arrest for five minutes.

Most people suffer brain damage after four. I'd been out for at least that long. I was extremely lucky.

Extremely.

"I... I should go home," I whispered, trying to keep my voice under control. Then I blew it by sobbing.

Cassie shooed the others out of the barn, making it clear that it was more important I get over my shock than pondering what no one knew anything about. She mentioned something about "trying to put a puzzle together without any pieces". It made me chuckle. Soon it was just her and me.

-_ sobbing. I couldn't stop. Cassie put her arm around me. She didn't know me - I was her enemy - and yet she held me close, putting my head on her shoulder. "That's right," she murmured. "That's exactly right."_-

-

"He- he-" I hiccuped.

"Shush," she chided me in the gentlest of voices. "Don't talk. Just-"

-

Obviously, the flashbacks hadn't stopped.

My tears streamed down my face, but they were cold; my tears, this time around, had ended. There were more, but they would wait patiently, unlike those I'd just shed. I wiped my face with a wobbly hand.

Cassie wrapped the blanket around my shoulders, sat on the floor beside me, and put her arm around me. "Are you going to be okay?" she asked.

I sighed softly, and nodded. The headache was fading. Mentally I pushed the pain in my head toward the center of my brain - and was shocked that it worked. That was another thing that should have vanished with Udrak - the ability to consolidate pain into one place and lock it away. I had never actually done it myself - when wounds from Dracon beams had scorched my shoulder and head, Udrak was the one who had consolidated the pain into my subconscious. When I sprained my elbow two years ago, he had suppressed the pain so that I hadn't known what was wrong until two weeks after the sprain. "I'll be fine," I said. The slur had left my voice, but now it sounded hollow, without emotion. All I was at the moment was tired and terrified, so the lack of emotion was on purpose - Mia worries enough about me; Cassie shouldn't.

I closed my eyes, willing myself into the place where I'd squirreled away my pain. My shoulders slumped forward on their own as I withdrew. Withdrawing is simple, when you know the map of your mind as well as I do mine. You just need to know where you're withdrawing to - in my case, a place between my subconscious and my nerve receptors that sent pain reactions back to their sources, where the pain could remain, unfelt, harmless.

Once I was deep in my mind, only minimally aware of the outside world, I started to weep once more. Weep, but shed no tears, as many Controllers do. Weep without the ability to react to the outside world. It was another thing I should not have been able to do - but this time, it was something that had rarely happened.

I hid, deep in my mind, without control of my physical self, like your average involuntary Controller.

I was a Controller without a Yeerk.

When was this going to end?

CHAPTER 8

Rachel's glare was toned down, only obvious because it was directed at me. "You look like a freak," she said. She frowned slightly. "You're sure you're okay for this?"

"The Chee believe living 'normally' might help," I replied, my voice sounding odd. It was too high for me, familiar in a very unnatural way. "This is about as close to 'average normal' I can get."

Marco shook his head. "School," he muttered, as if it was a bad word. "Why not the movies, or the mall? A ballgame? Heck, an opera!"

I laughed. "Opera? I don't think so. And there aren't any decent plays in production around here. And I'm not a ballgame/concert

person. Besides, I really shouldn't go to movies during the schoolday. I might be accused of cutting school. _Then_ where would I be?"

"_Anything_ but school," Marco finished, as if I hadn't spoken.

"I'm not really looking forward to it," I admitted. "There's no way this building can meet Veedric's special brand of teaching. Thanks to him, I will _never_ hate history. The Chee definitely have a way of getting you into it. Literally." I chuckled. "Besides, you're all a year behind me."

Above, the shadow of a hawk passed over us. Whoa! I heard Tobias cry in surprise. Sarah, that _you_?

"Somewhat," I said, looking as if I was talking to Marco, but actually it was meant for Tobias.

Manâ€¦ I'm sorry, but...

"Don't bother," I said, rolling my eyes and waving the matter off.

Let me explain.

Obviously, I couldn't go to the others' school looking like myself. There's too many Controllers - one of which is their vice-principal - to risk it.

That's why I took the time to acquire Rachel and Cassie. Thanks to Aximili's knowledge via Udrak, I knew how to do a _Frolis_ Maneuver, and combined their DNA.

The reactions of the others was because of my appearance in that morph. See, a mix of Rachel's pale-skinned, blue-eyed-and-long-blond-haired model and Cassie's chocolate-skinned, brown-eyed-and-short-almost black-haired girl-next-door made for a very strange sight.

My skin was a little darker than your average Asian person, as if I was Asian but had a massive tan. Meanwhile, my hair was a sort of dark dirty-blondish color - not overly light, but at least four shades lighter than my skin. My eyes, like Rachel's, were blue, but with brown flecks in them, as if I was wearing blue contacts over brown eyes, and the contacts had chips in them. Generally, I looked like an Asian girl who spent too much time in tanning booths and wasted money using cheap bleach on my hair.

But, on the good side, I'd grown a total of two inches, but a little thinner, so all my clothes still fit.

Even then, though, I wasn't dressed like normal, in my usual jeans and tee-shirt outfit. Instead, Rachel had dug into her closet and given me a dress she'd had from last year, that no longer fit her right, but fit me perfectly. Well, almost - its neck was a little tight, and the sleeves were a little short, and normally I would _never_ have worn anything with so short a skirtâ€¦ but I wasn't complaining. Complaining _out loud_, anyway. It was definitely better than wearing nothing at all.

I marched up the steps to the front door. A slightly balding man, middle age causing his stomach to sag a bit but otherwise being pretty kind to him, stood there, eyes watching for the slightest sign of disorder. His eyes fell on me, and I recognized him.

Iniss Two-two-six.

-_not look like the other voluntaries. He sat slumped into the chair beside mine, looking deathly miserable. Thinking he might be ill, I leaned over. "Are you okay?"_

-

"Never," he muttered. He glared at me with such hate in his eyes I cringed back. "Not so long as that filthy slug controls me."

I was confused. "You don't like your Yeerk, but you're voluntary?"

"It's either that, or they take my daughter." My confusion melted into sympathy. He sighed, closing his eyes. He rubbed his forehead. "Of course, Iniss Two-two-six might get a demotion after allowing an Andalite into my home. They morphed my daughter's cat." He chuckled, smiling grimly. "You have no idea how good it felt to have him taken down like that."

-

_ I patted his hand. "Have courage," I said_-

"-is this?" the Controller finished the question I hadn't even heard the beginning to. His smile toward me was enforced, probably from my appearance.

I knew, with my dark skin, blue eyes, and weirdly-toned hair, I looked like I should have piercings bristling from every part of my body or something. But, even though both Rachel and Cassie have pierced ears, body piercing isn't something you can acquire through DNA, so the only uncovered holes I had were my ears and mouth. I smiled weakly. "Hiya! I'm Stacey," I said. I hugged Marco around his shoulders. "Markie's my cousin." Marco has olive skin; of all the Animorphs, he was the only one I could possibly claim kinship to and be even remotely believed. "He's going to show me around - my folks and I might be moving here next summer."

Iniss Two-two-six made his poor host smile. "I'm Hedrick Chapman, vice-principal. It'd be good if someone kept Marco in line." He glanced at Marco, as if hinting that a troublemaker hid under Marco's wide, playful grin.

Marco wagged his eyebrows. "Who, _me_? _Me_ Marco? Surely you mean someone else, _sir_!" He threw a quick salute to "Chapman".

"Keep telling yourself that," I told Marco, smirking.

"Chapman" smiled, then excused himself.

"Jerk," I muttered under my breath. It was the most decent thing I could think to call Iniss Two-two-six without using a word that shouldn't be overheard by selected persons.

Especially Iniss Two-two-six.

I followed Marco into the building.

*

Like all the periods before, the teacher didn't blink twice about my being there. That was a far cry from my own school, where my parents would have had to consent to the tour, in person _and_ in writing.

Social studies. I'd always felt kind of annoyed at social studies. English and art teach us humankind's creative side, and math and science teach us its intelligent side, but what did social studies teach? Answer: humankind's stupidity.

Wars. Dictatorships. Genocide. Corruption. Poverty. Bias.

I hate politics. Therefore, I've always had a great distaste for social studies.

There were two empty seats in the entire room. I took the one on Marco's left. The other was on Marco's right.

I wondered if there was a reason no one sat to either side of Marco.

Marco had a quiz that period. He groaned so loud the entire class laughed. The teacher - a lady who looked at least three thousand years old - gave him A Look before putting a paper in front of him. She put one in front of me, too. I snatched a pencil out of Marco's bag to write in some answers. It wasn't like I had anything better to do.

List three former European colonies. Oh, please. _Canada, Brazil, and South America_, I wrote. Easy.

What sort of warfare did French settlers use against the British? Again, too easy. _Guerrilla warfare_, I wrote. I glanced at Marco, wondering if he would put 'gorilla warfare'. He has a fondness for his gorilla morph.

In which major war did the colonists use this type of warfare for the early battles. What was this? Trivial Pursuit for Toddlers? Too easy. _The Civil War_.

Slavery was one cause of the Civil War. Name another one. _The fact that the North was mainly industrialized and the South was mainly agricultural_, I wrote. I'd forgotten what that was called.

What city was blockaded by Northern troops and ships until the South was forced to surrender it before the people starved? Oh, come _on!_ This "quiz" was nothing but... crud. That's what I was going to say - crud. _New Orleans_. I stopped myself from adding _duh_.

Just as I pulled the pencil from the paper, keeping myself from writing the 'd', Mr. Chapman/Iniss Two-two-six walked through the door. "I'm sorry," Chapman told the teacher, "but I'm showing our new student around personally." She nodded in acceptance of Chapman's

apology, but still looked a little annoyed.

Then I noticed the girl behind him.

Actually, the first thing I really noticed was her hair. It was very, very, very long and really, really, really red. I'm serious. It was loose and hung so low that, if she wasn't careful, she'd probably step on it if she moved backwards too quickly. Its color would look fake on anyone else, but on her it seemed perfectly natural. She wore a baggy green sweater and jeans, and a pair of really beat-up sneakers. It was impossible to tell for sure, but they may have been white about a millennia ago.

Her face almost looked as weird as her hair. It looked downright screwed up, to put it in my usual blunt manner. Her eyes were too long and narrow, as if she were an Andalite, squinting. They were a really weird, yellow-greenish color, like a cat's. Her pupils looked too small, though the fluorescent lights were a little too bright in the room. The only colors in her face were those in her eyes, the large freckles that covered most of her nose and some of her cheeks, and the natural red of her mouth. (In fact, that was the only thing naturally colored about her.) Her mouth itself was rather small, and set in a scowl that could have melted stone. All this in a face that seemed too narrow to hold everything it had to. My inspection done, I quickly looked away before those Andalite-like eyes could see me staring. Another shiver ran down my spine; everything about her just seemed... unnatural.

Chapman's Yeerk, however, didn't seem to notice, or care. Neither did the teacher - until the cat-eyes turned on her. "What is your name?" she asked the girl in a stiff voice.

"I am Ikell." She said it "Ee-kell". "I am staying with a foster family just outside of town." Her voice was really cold and sort of quiet - menacing, almost. She hissed a little when she said "s", and there was a faint trace of a foreign accent.

I saw the teacher shudder a little before she pointed to the only empty seat in the class - the one to Marco's right. "You may sit there," she said. She sighed. "Class, please pass up your quizzes. I'll simply grade what you have done."

Marco breathed a sigh of relief, and gladly surrendered his paper to the kid in front of him. When the kid behind him tapped his shoulder, he swung his arm around behind him to get the papers from her. His hand brushed Ikell's sweater as she sat down. Nothing major. Less than a tap, really. She glared at Marco like he'd slapped her. From this close, I saw that her corneas (the colored part of the eye) were sort of oblong - too thin and too high, more reptilian than human. Her narrow eyes narrowed even more as she studied Marco, then me, and her head cocked a bit to the side.

I looked away, unable to meet those horrible eyes.

Only one good thing came of the entire day.

I had only the single flashback all day.

CHAPTER 9

"Yeah, she's weird," Marco said, his mouth full of nachos. He swallowed and reached into his carton for more. "She's in my social studies class. That girl has the perfect face for an 'If looks could kill' add."

"As if there were such a thing," Rachel scoffed.

"Who knows?" Marco shot back.

"I don't know," Cassie said. She was holding a nacho close to her mouth, but hadn't bit it yet. "She's in my gym class. While we were waiting for attendance, she stood in a corner, watching everything. It was like she expected someone to shoot her if she let anyone out of her sight. And she's strong, too - in dodgeball, she didn't just knock the air out of Bear Garrison - she knocked him off his feet." Bear is the junior-varsity quarterback. Bear is his nickname, of course - just like Garrison isn't his real last name. He is huge. A 200-pound football player barely knocks any wind out of him. I think he sort of intimidates Cassie - I mean, the guy looks four times bigger than her. Which makes him almost four times bigger than me, considering I'm not much bigger than Cassie. "She didn't miss once."

"So she's creepy, paranoid, and Supergirl," Marco said. He sounded a little cross. "Why are we still talking about her?"

We were hanging out at the mall the afternoon after my trip to school, trying to look natural. I was back in my weirdo mix-morph. Tobias was himself - pre-hawk, that is: he was in morph - and Ax was using his human morph, and scarfing nachos so fast... let's just say, the way Ax eats, I'm surprised he hasn't choked yet. Cassie had brought up the subject of Ikell, - she had pronounced it "Ik-kell", which I think sounds better - and Marco was right: we'd been talking about her a long time.

"Do you think she might be a rotten egg?" Ax asked. "Rotten egg" must be the lamest way to say uncool jerk, but, for now, it has a different meaning to us.

It means a Controller.

Of course, Ax was quick to follow it up with, "Rot. Rot-ten. Ten egg. Egg-gah. Do rotten eggs taste good?"

"Only if you're into that sort of thing," Marco replied. "I don't know - never tried one. Though I did once drink clotted milk by accident. If you like car oil, Ax, you still haven't tried anything until you've drank clotted milk."

I shook my head, ignoring Ax's fun-with-sounds and Marco's characteristic nonsense. "Too obvious. But I think she may know one. You remember Melissa."

Melissa is the name of Chapman's daughter. She and Rachel used to be close friends, but then both of Melissa's parents became Controllers, and Melissa and Rachel grew apart. The others had filled me in on that information when we spoke earlier about my short run-in with Chapman.

"You really think so?" Rachel asked worriedly. "She said she was in a

foster home, right?" She choked a little on a nacho. "Do you think her parents were... killed?" Her voice dropped to a whisper as she added, "Like Mr. Pardue?" Mr. Pardue used to be Jake's first period teacher. The Yeerks killed him when his Yeerk began to die, right in front of his class. Mr. Chapman did it when he didn't think anyone could see. But Ax - posing as Jake's "cousin", Philip - and Jake did.

"Maybe she saw it," Marco said excitedly. Not excited as in going on a new roller coaster or something, but giddy in a bad way. Panicky. "Maybe she knows! May-"

Cassie and I, sitting on opposite sides of Marco, both elbowed him hard at the same time. Slimy nachos flew from his mouth, spraying Rachel, Tobias, and Jake. "Hey!" Rachel yelled. "What's the big idea?!" Tobias sort of flapped his arms, like he was trying to fly away, for a moment before calming down and brushing himself off.

"That's what... I'd... like to know," Marco gasped. He held his sides, cringing.

"Ikell," Ax whispered. He was sitting next to me, safe from projectile nachos. Of us all, he was the only one who pronounced her name "Ee-kell", like she had.

"Look away," I hissed. "Geez, you're all staring!" When they were all politely looking somewhere else, I looked casually.

She was sitting only a few tables away, but she was thankfully out of earshot. Her too-narrow eyes were focused right on our table. A nearly untouched box of french fries was in front of her, though she appeared totally oblivious to it. As if she'd seen me looking back, she turned her face away with a jerk, but I could tell that she was still looking at us out of the corner of those eyes of hers. Suddenly, her hand shot out, snatching a french fry as if she were trying to steal it. She tore off the end of it with her teeth as if to tear off its non-existent head. I quickly turned back around. "Weird," I breathed, shuddering.

Rachel was staring at Ikell again. Suddenly, she stood up and began walking toward Ikell's table.

I nearly jumped out of my chair, but Marco pulled me back down again. "What is she doing?!" I hissed.

He shrugged. "Probably going off to get us all killed. Nothing new." He shoved the last of his nachos into his mouth, swallowed, and crumpled up the box as small as he could. He threw it in Ikell's direction, aiming for the wastebasket on the other side of her table. It fell short, skidding across Ikell's table to come to rest next to her box of fries. She looked at the box in surprise. Just then, Rachel pulled out one of the two empty chairs at the table and sat down. Ikell looked... overwhelmed. Almost like she was as ready to jump to her feet as I was.

You might be wondering why I was being kind of paranoid. Thing is, you don't know what it's like, having to second-guess absolutely everything you say and do. I doubt that if you accidentally revealed one of your secrets to somebody you'd be as likely to end up dead as

we are. And everything about Ikell, from that ridiculous red hair to her ancient sneakers, unnerved me.

Marco reached over the table to punch my arm. "Don't just sit there," he said a little too loudly, "you missed. Go get it!" He winked, then stole a nacho from one of Ax's remaining boxes. That is to say, we'd bought him six and there were two left; he'd eaten the other four, boxes and all. Ax gave him a surprised look, but Tobias just rolled his eyes and sighed, flicking the last piece of nacho off his sleeve with his finger. Cassie shook her head, smiling a little.

I didn't wait any longer. In his own crooked way, Marco had given me an excuse to go see what Rachel was up to. Jake gave me a funny look as I left the table, a sort of look that said, "Be careful" and "I should be doing that" at the same time. I walked over to where Ikell and Rachel were sitting, then pulled out the other chair at the small table and gave Ikell a small smile. "Sorry about that," I said. "I missed." I threw the box at the garbage. It bounced off the back rim and went in.

She cocked her head slightly to one side, staring at me. "Your friend threw the box. Why do you fetch it?" Her voice was strangely clipped, like she was chirping or something. I suddenly realized, for no apparent reason, that I'd never seen her blink.

"Because Marco's a jerk," Rachel replied before I could say anything.

A ghost of a smile played along Ikell's face, then disappeared. She nudged the box closer to me. "French fry?"

They were utterly plain - no ketchup or even salt. I shook my head, then held out my hand. "Hi. I'm Stacey."

She shook my hand - and crushed it in the process. "I know, Stacey," she chirped. "Ms. Colton asked you is if you were awake in class yesterday." She blinked twice, once right after the other, as if she had read my thoughts.

"Which I wasn't." I chuckled. After that stupid quiz, I'd started dozing off.

Her eyes widened in shock, and she sort of jerked back. You know how, in some horror films, vampires have huge pupils and nearly yellow eyes? That's exactly what she looked like, except her canine teeth weren't quite that sharp and her eyes were a little too green. Of course, they were still oddly shaped, which made it just as spooky. I wondered if she had contacts that made them do that. "You-" she gasped, but stopped in the middle of her sentence, looking confused. In a quieter voice she continued awkwardly, "You told her what was untrue?"

"Uh - yeah, I lied," I answered. Unintentionally, I was leaning away

from her. She scared me, staring at me like that with those strange eyes. I wanted nothing more than for her to look away - anywhere - but directly at me. "It was either that, or be sent to Chapman's office. I wouldn't want to be sent there."

She shuddered. "I... understand," she said slowly. Her voice had lost the chirping effect, sounding... deeper. She nibbled a french fry.

"Well, uh... Cassie tells me you're staying in a foster home, Ikell," Rachel said. "What happened to your family?"

"My... family?" She closed her eyes. Her left hand clenched so tightly, her knuckles turned white. After a few seconds, it relaxed, and she said slowly, almost to herself, "My brothers are dead. I do not remember my mother or sisters, but they are gone. My father... he could not care for me. It is safest that I be here."

Rachel and I shared a look, and she mouthed, Safest? "Oh," she said aloud. She patted Ikell's hand, which gained her a sharp look. "I'm sorry."

"No need," Ikell replied curtly. Her faint accent became more pronounced, and I could have sworn I recognized it somehow, but I couldn't think of why or from where. "My brothers... there were five of them, I remember... one died in the fields, the twins in a war that must be fought but can't be won. And one, he... he was lost otherwise." Rachel and I glanced at each other again, but Ikell didn't notice. "My father was - is - a good man. Nothing can change that." Her face became a mask of hatred. "Nothing and no one, no matter what they might do!" she muttered angrily. Her fist suddenly rose up, and Rachel and I backed away from her. It slammed down on the table, leaving a spider web of cracks where it hit. "NO ONE!!" she screamed. In a quiet voice that scared me more than her scream, one that was more a growl than a voice, she finished, "I will not let them."

People all around us turned to look at her. Her head whipped left and right and back again, and I swear that she had the same exact look on her face that the rabbit I'd chased as a cheetah had worn. Her pupils seemed smaller and thinner than ever, more than any humans' pupils had the right to be. With a quiet, high-pitched cry I barely heard but made my ears ring painfully, Ikell jumped up and began walking away at light speed.

As she passed our table, she glanced down at Marco, Cassie, Tobias, Jake, and Ax.

And stopped dead.

She stared at each one of them in turn, her nose wrinkling as if she were sniffing at something. Other people had begun to ignore her, but Rachel and I were watching closely.

Cassie looked up, meeting Ikell's fierce gaze with her own soft one and a smile. "Can we help you? You're Ikell, right? I'm Cassie - I saw you in gym today."

"That is... nice. Excuse me," she replied. Again she went on her way.

Rachel and I joined the others.

"Now that was weird," Marco said. "What's up with her?"

"Shut up, lamebrain," Rachel snapped. "She's been through a lot."

I looked up to see if Ikell was gone.

After about a minute, Cassie leaned across the table to touch my arm. "Stacey?" she asked worriedly. "Stacey! Are you okay? _Stacey?_"

I didn't answer. All I could do was stare at Ikell, who was about a quarter of the mall away...

â€|staring back.

*

That night I was in my room doing my homework. Mia and I had agreed that it was a good sign that the "seizures" had stopped, but that I shouldn't assume they were over completely. "Nothing occurs without reason," Mia had pointed out. I believe the same thing.

The door opened with a slight, hissing whine. I never complained about the tiny noise, because I actually appreciate it. It tells me someone is coming in, even if I have my back to the door or my eyes closed. I swiveled my desk chair around.

Erek stood in the doorway. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said. He smiled slightly. "I should've knocked first."

"That's okay," I said. "Besides, would I have heard it?" As I mentioned before - or should have, anyway - the walls are soundproof. That includes the door.

He laughed. "That's true. We'll have to install a doorbell."

"What's up?"

His smile faded to nothingness. "It's about the school the others go to. Where you went on a 'field trip' yesterday."

"Yeah?"

Now he was frowning. "There's a new student there. A girl by the name of Ikell Garrison." He said it "Ee-kell".

"Her? Yeah, she joined Marco's social studies class yesterday. Eerie girl."

"Not just eerie." His frown deepened. "We do not trust her, Sarah."

My eyebrows pulled downward. They do that when I'm confused or angry. Right then, I was confused. "Why not?"

He grimaced a little before answering. "It's... you would not understand, but... she smells wrong."

"_Smells_ wrong?"

"Not as other humans do. True, she smells human. But... also... _different_. Familiar, in a way we have yet to recognize, but not normal."

"So you're saying she needs to be treated with care until you remember what she _smells_ like?"

He sighed a little. "I knew you were going to put it that way."

I smiled lopsidedly. "How could I _possibly_ disappoint you?"

Erek grinned, then bowed slightly before turning and leaving the room. The door shut behind him.

I stood up, my concentration gone. I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling. Sometimes I like doing absolutely nothing. It helps clear my head, and sometimes solves problems I have that I've been thinking too hard on.

I don't know when I drifted off to sleep.

_ Sarah, I am truly sorry- _

-

Udrak? Here? Udrak! I screamed, but it was like he couldn't hear me.

-you'll have finished grieving-

-

_ _Udrak!!_ I howled, as if sheer volume would let him hear me, but it didn't work._

-

-why should you mourn your enemy? But you do- There it was again, that sort of fast forward, images and words blurring into a single whine. -trade for a seat on the Council of Thirteen-

Udrak, what are you talking about? I demanded. Udrak, make sense! Stop it!

-I taught you long ago-

Stop it! Stop!

-

_ -Please, farewell_...._ _

- -

"**_STOP IT!!!!!!_**"

I tried to sit bolt upright, but something held me down at the shoulders. I struggled violently. No! They had taken him away! "Udrak!" I screamed. I couldn't recognize the inhuman wail that escaped me. "No!"

"Sarah!" a familiar voice cried. It sounded horrified. "Sarah, wake up! Sarah!"

"No!" I screamed. "No! Bring him back! Udrak! _Udrak!_"

"Case!" another familiar, but more forceful, voice yelled at me. "Sarah! _Casey-Sarah_, _stop it_!"

I started sobbing, thrashing with my arms and legs. They were soon braced, just like my upper body was. I was completely pinned. I couldn't move. I tried swinging my head, but someone grabbed that, too. Their fingers were freezing, but human. "Let me go!" I wailed, my voice unrecognizable. "Please, just let me go!" Then I began sobbing too hard to say anything else.

"Do it," one of the voices - the first one, calmer now - said.

"But she-" a voice I didn't recognize began.

"Just _do_ it!" the first voice said. "Have pity, Netrel! The poor girl's out of her mind with fear." I was perched in a sitting position against someone's arm. Someone stroked my hair. "It's all right," the first voice said in a soft voice. "There, there, Sarah, everything's all right."

My eyes clenched shut, my right hand digging its fingers into the left in a harsh mimicry of massaging a pain that I no longer had, I buried my face into someone's chest and simply sobbed.

*

Later I learned that the first voice was Mia. The second was Veedric, my tutor. He'd come to check my homework and opened the sound-proof door to find me screaming and thrashing in bed. He'd grabbed my arms. Ereka, who'd come with Mia when Veedric called for them to help, had grabbed my legs. It was Mia who had first braced my shoulders, then, when Netrel took her place, kept my head still so I wouldn't hurt myself. It was Mia who held me close and just let me cry.

It was later still that I realized that six years had passed from what I thought was happening to me.

Six years... since a time Udrak and I were almost separated. Udrak had panicked, as he had done when we'd snapped at the guard. He'd tried to run, but we didn't make it. He was forcefully removed. He managed to convince Visser Three that it was stress.

For me, it _was_ stress. I nearly killed myself with madness.

Madness.

Was I going insane?

CHAPTER 10

"Long time no see."

I smiled. I'm afraid the expression wasn't very sincere. "Hiya, David."

"Dave. Please." He wrinkled his nose a little. "That was one of the

things I didn't like about the others. Always 'David this' or 'David, do'. Only my dad ever called me David."

I sat on a tire swing. "I like what you've done with the place."

He looked around a bit. "Well, it's kind of broken up," he said. "I have to work on it."

I looked at the scattered collection of bedrooms with two walls, the swimming pool with eight deep ends in six different directions, the odd assortment of playgrounds and fast food restaurants. David's own little world. Then I looked at him. He hadn't changed much from the default setting - his hair was a little longer, and now he wore jean shorts, black Nikes, and a gray shirt emblazoned Adida on both sides. His eyes were grayer, and he was about two inches taller. I was a bit surprised that he didn't turn himself into some cross of Superman and Brad Pitt, but I was kind of happy that he wasn't fooling himself completely. "Happy?"

He shrugged a little. "It's too fake," he said. "I'm just decorating now. Figuring what I want of what, you know? I have a lot of stuff to chose from. Places I've been. Things I had. Things I wanted."

I nodded. "Big job."

"I have the time." He looked down at me from his perch on a slide. It was a little, four-foot-tall slide, like you find on backyard swing sets. My tire swing was attached to it with a metal bar which became a wood plank quite suddenly, about a foot and a half from the swing. The plank tapered to nothingness a foot after the swing. Like I said, the place looked extremely weird, but in an orderly sort of way. "How's it going with you?"

It was my turn to shrug. Then I shook my head. "Not so good."

"What's up?"

I sighed. "Remember how I told you I had a Yeerk in my head?"

He scowled a little. "Yeah."

"Well, that Yeerk? He was in my head for seven years." David - Dave - whistled softly between his teeth. "Now he's gone. Yeerks are like everyday people. Some are good. Most aren't. Somewhere I got the luck to have one of the best."

"Best good, or best bad?"

"Best good." I rubbed my forehead. "But now he's gone. He starved himself to death for me. You have no idea... no idea what it is to know someone did that for you." Dave was scowling again. This time, it was in agreement. He didn't say anything. "But now... now I've started having these... these flashbacks. There's no other way to describe it. I remember things with utter clarity. Things I've said. Things I've done. Things other people that Udrak controlled did, as if I'd done them."

"Udrak?" Dave looked confused again. "That's the name of the Yeerk, right?"

"Yeah."

"But you said that was what you and that Andalite had in common."

"'That Andalite' happens to be named Aximili," I reminded him kindly. "And yes, I did say that. I wasn't the only one Udrak did a few worlds of good to."

Dave shook his head. "Whatever. I don't think I want to know." There was silence a moment. He looked at me.

I looked back. "What?"

He chuckled a little, shaking his head. "Nothing. It's just... the others... if I'd said something like that, they'd've told me."

"You want me to?"

"No."

"Well, since it doesn't directly affect you - and shouldn't in any way, shape, or form - and since I really don't want to talk about it, why should I tell you?"

"Finally, some reason." I gave him a funny look. He winked at me, then laughed. "Hey, stop that. Don't look at me like that." I stared at him for a few moments, just to tease. He laughed again. A pillow appeared in his hand. He jumped to the dull green, flat ground. "I said quit it!" A pillow appeared in my hand, and I blocked his weapon, sliding off the tire swing as I did so in order to get some maneuverability. "Hey, no fair!" He was still laughing. He got me in the side of the head with his pillow.

I got him in the side, then blocked another blow aimed for my head. "Hey, I came here for conversation, not a pillow fight!" I cried, then ate pillow as Dave got me right in the face. I sputtered, then slammed him in the back so hard he fell over. I hit him on the top of the head once before snatching away his pillow and throwing both pillows aside.

He laughed as he rolled over. I helped him up. He calmed down, wiping his silly grin off his face. "Sorry," he said, flopping onto the tire swing. He grinned again. "That was fun."

"A pillow fight. Real mature, Dave."

"Admit it. It was fun."

I sat next to him on the swing. "It was fun. Immature, but fun. And off the subject."

He nodded a little. He stopped smiling. "Okay. Flashbacks. I'm guessing that's some sort of problem?"

"It was. I was distracted - completely distracted. I'd just zone out. Then... then I'd stop breathing."

"What?"

"I'd just - stop. One time..." I shuddered. "Once I stopped... completely. No breathing. No heartbeat." Dave's grimace was so deep it looked painful. I shook my head again. "If it hadn't been for Rachel and Marco, I wouldn't be here right now."

"Why? What'd they do? Some alien morph with healing powers?"

"Better. CPR."

"Oh."

"Yesterday I only had one, really short flashback. No big troubles - just a distraction. That was good. Today, I doze off and end up forgetting six years of my life."

"Wait - what do you mean?"

"I forgot six years. I woke up and thought it was six years ago. I had one of those flashbacks, and ended up thinking something horrible that had happened years ago was still happening.

the teeth flashed, clamping into my hand. I threw back my head and shrieked in utter agony. Someone screamed the name of the dog. Someone screamed mine. I just screamed. The teeth had gone through... the dog's jaw was nearly closed-

--

I groaned, wiping at my face, and the sympathy tears that sprung to my eyes at the remembered pain.

"You okay?" Dave asked.

"Yeah. It happened again."

"What?"

"The flashbacks. I remembered..." I sighed, and held out my left hand. "That."

He looked at it. "What?"

I looked at my hand - and remembered suddenly that, along with my Dracon wounds, my first morphing had healed the scars left by the dog. I concentrated, and four deep recesses appeared in my hand on both sides. White, round scars ran between them. David bared his teeth - a rat reaction - at the sight of it. It wasn't very pretty. "Labrador. I was little. It bit me. Nearly forty stitches." Dave grimaced, but didn't say anything. "Not an entirely pleasant memory. Of course, most of the memories I've been having haven't been pleasant. That's about all they have in common."

I thought about it. First was the terror of my first encounter with alien life. There'd been an echo of it in the halls of the back rooms of The Gardens. Then the feeling of being a cat - of getting ready for the instincts. That one was of wariness, of preporation. The third time was the memory of his goodbye, the memory that didn't sit well with me. Why? What was wrong with it?

"Sarah? You still there?"

"Shut up," I said distractedly. He frowned, his eyes narrowing, but I barely noticed. "I'm thinking."

The next three times had been of my trip to the back room at the Gardens - a place that smelled sort of bad and whose drab, efficient nature sat badly with me -; of telling Mia she could look in my journal - I'd been annoyed at the time, distracted; and of the argument Aximili and I had weeks ago, when both of us were afraid and biting at each other's heads. The next bout had been a reoccurrence of part of the original flashback - and the second time one memory was a fragment from the first. Then there'd been two of Aximili's memories - one of being trapped, afraid, under the ocean, and the other of the horror of having to trap someone in morph as a rat. There'd been several small ones, all having confusion, or pain, or panic, or anger, or something equally unpleasant. Then they slowly trickled off after about a week, until the sudden relapse that made me think I was six years younger than I actually am.

But each one, fearful. Or angry. Or edgy.

Or simply terrifying.

"Something isn't sitting well with me," I said aloud, swinging my legs back and forth and making the tire swing rock. "Two memories are strong in my mind - the one where I met Udrak for the first time, and the one in which he said goodbye to me. But... but the second, the goodbye..."

It hit me like a Bug fighter in maximum burn.

It wasn't one thing wrong with the goodbye.

That was why I couldn't pinpoint what was wrong!

The entire thing was wrong.

"What?" Dave asked, looking confused. I don't wonder why.

I jumped up. He grabbed the chains suspending the tire swing as it bounced wildly and spun around. "The goodbye!" I cried, clenching my hands into fists. "It's all wrong!"

"Wrong?" he echoed. "Sarah, if you're going to talk to me, say something I'll understand!" he snapped at me.

I whirled to face him. "From the first I knew there was something wrong with my memory of Udrak's goodbye. But I was wrong! It's not that some_thing is wrong - it's that some_things are wrong. The whole time I was trying to pinpoint the problem, and it can't be! The problem isn't little, it's major!" I shook my head, turning away again. "I was missing what was right in front of me!"

I heard him sigh heavily, in a way that suggested he'd run out of patience. "Sarah, talk sense or go away," he growled.

I turned to face him again. "Okay, the first problem with the memory was that it wasn't complete. At first, the memories came whenever

something I was doing, or something I was thinking, triggered them somehow. There'd be some connection. I would suddenly end up living something I'd already been through, down to the slightest detail. When I missed Udrak, I'd remember him saying goodbye - but I didn't remember everything! It had gaps - fastforwards, rewinds.... like a scratched CD, sort of. It'd get to a point where it couldn't continue, then speed to the closest place to restart.

"Okay, second point. I could interact with the memory. Udrak would be talking, and I'd interrupt him. But he'd just go on regardless. I was aware that it was a memory. In the others, I just relived what had already happened. It felt like it was happening now, not when it had. With that one, that single one, I was able to react normally. The memory went on without me. That isn't supposed to happen, is it?"

"I've.... never had that problem...." Dave said slowly. He still didn't see where I was going with my point.

I pressed on regardless. "Third: whenever I remembered it, something progressively bad happened. First it didn't do much. Second time I went into cardiac arrest. Third time, I nearly killed myself, went completely looney, and got amnesia. With the others, the most I'd do was hiccup - I'd stop breathing for a couple moments. Nothing utterly serious. With that memory, it was different."

"And four - the biggie." He looked at me with one eyebrow raised, waiting for the answer to a question he didn't understand. "I don't remember it, because it could never have happened."

He scoffed at that and shook his head. "Excuse me... what?" He glared at me. "You're remembering something you don't remember because it's impossible?"

"Something like that," I agreed. "See, when Udrak died, he was starved. He was in agony. He couldn't think straight. Yet I'm remembering a goodbye speech? No way! He couldn't think more than a word at a time, much less a speech! And, besides that, I know he didn't say goodbye. He just sort of.... muttered." I shuddered at the memory. At the fragments, the horrible, all-encompassing agony I could only numbly feel and could do nothing for. At the jerks and spasms of his mind as it collapsed within my own.

At the terrible, haunting memory of intimately watching someone who means more to you than anything - as a part of yourself - dies the most horrible death and not being able to do a damn thing.

And yes, I just swore.

I opened my eyes. I barely remembered closing them. "Something is wrong with me, Dave," I said softly.

He looked thoughtful. He leaned over, resting his elbows on his knees. His eyes narrowed in severe concentration. An eyebrow arched up for a moment, then returned to its normal place. His mouth twitched, then his eyes blinked. The eyebrow jerked again. Then he looked at me again. "I think I understand," he said slowly, as if he was still thinking about what he was saying. "You just talked so fast I needed a little time to catch up. So you're remembering an event that could not have taken place, having a memory you realize is a

memory, and every time you 'remember' it, you have a serious problem. And, you still haven't remembered the whole thing." I nodded. He frowned. "There's only one thing I can think of." I grimaced. "You have to remember it all."

"What do you mean?" I asked tonelessly.

He sat up a little straighter. "You know, hydrogen and oxygen, in their pure forms, are extremely flammable. A little spark, and WHOOSH! - instant inferno. But together they make water - best thing to put out a normal fire. And sodium and chlorine? Two extremely toxic elements. But together they make everyday table salt."

"So?"

He frowned a little. He didn't like the interruption. "So... so, sometimes, when something's not complete, what is helpful can hurt pretty bad. If we tried putting out a fire with hydrogen or oxygen we'd be defeating our own purposes. If we put sodium or chlorine on our food we'd be asking to kill ourselves. Maybe it's the same with this 'memory'. Maybe you're killing yourself because you're not getting the entire thing."

"That.... that makes sense," I murmured. He nodded. "But how do I access the whole thing? These flashbacks happen without me wanting them to. I can't control them."

"Like I should know?"

I sighed. "I'll take it up with the Chee. Maybe they have a way that can induce the memory. Thanks, Dave."

"Sure."

I smiled faintly. It wasn't any better than my original smile. "See you later, okay?"

"Yup."

CHAPTER 11

The Chee were working on the problem.

Meanwhile, the rest of us had other things to deal with. Namely, the strange-smelling Ikell.

What does she smell like? Marco asked, swiss cheese? I mean, what? Saying she smells weird doesn't tell us much.

I forced myself not to sigh. I just told you - the Chee said she smelled 'familiar'. They didn't say like what. I don't think they remember.

Chee do not forget, Aximili pointed out.

I know, I replied.

Normally, we would have met in Tobias' meadow or Cassie's barn, but the former had a bad memory for the others and the latter had a bad memory for me. So instead we were meeting at Aximili's "scoop". A

scoop is an Andalite's version of a house, but it's completely open to the air. There's a small overhang for if he wants to get out of the sun or rain or whatever, but otherwise it's just a little storage compartment where he keeps a few books, a television, some pictures, something that looks vaguely like a radio - which I think it's supposed to be - and something else that resembles a blown up remote control - which I know isn't what it looks like.

We'd been scouting out Yeerk pool entrances. Now, we were 'practicing morphs'. That's to say, we were relaxing by morphing and calling it 'practicing' so Jake couldn't point out that we were using morphing for personal reasons.

Not that he could. As I watched, Aximili tossed a stick in a pathetic Andalite throw, and Jake went zooming crazily after it. He was in the morph of his dog, Homer, and loving every minute of the game.

Marco was in his gorilla morph, moving a giant log to block off a path that led directly to Aximili's scoop in order to make it harder to get there. Rachel and Tobias were sparring with each other in their respective Hork-Bajir morphs. They looked like they were going to slice each other to pieces, but each time they swung they would miss by a mere centimeter or two. Cassie was morphed as a horse. I was in a morph I'd gotten from Cassie's barn - a coyote. It was my equivalent to the others' wolf morphs, but, since Cassie hadn't had any wolves handy, I'd have to make due with a smaller and more agile, but somewhat slower, coyote. I didn't mind. It was kind of disappointing, actually. It was just like being a dog, only a little less goofy.

So why wouldn't they tell us? Rachel demanded.

Like I should know? I snapped before I'd thought. That was what David had yelled at me. I pressed my teeth together. A whine emerged.

Are you sure you're okay to be out, Sarah? Cassie asked me. She looked down at me around her incredibly huge nose.

I'm fine, I muttered, dismissing the thought with a snap of my tail. What's important now is figuring out what's wrong with this Ikell girl, even if the Chee won't tell us.

Aximili threw the stick again. Jake went tearing after it, then brought it back. Aximili tried to take the stick back, but Jake growled playfully, refusing to let go. I doubted he'd heard a word I'd said.

Jake has less experience being a dog.

Prince Jake? Aximili said, looking at him worriedly. Are you in control?

Yeah - of the stick! Ha ha! Like the rest of us, Jake can use thought-speak in spite of his humanity, but only when he's in morph. Ax probably can when he's in his human morph, but I don't think he really wants to. Using his mouth is too cool.

He smiled at Jake with only his eyes. Are you certain? He pulled the stick out of Jake's mouth with a sharp tug and threw it again.

Meanwhile, Marco finally dropped the log. Do not try this at home, he said to no one in particular. He sounded pleased with himself.

Rachel turned to look at him and grinned a terrifying Hork-Bajir grin. Yeah - your dad would probably freak, she joked.

Marco glared at Rachel and showed his extremely big, sharp teeth. Shut up, he snapped. His teeth weren't nearly as big or sharp as hers were at the moment, but that didn't really matter.

Marco's mom disappeared a two years ago, and all he had left is his dad. He's extremely protective of him. Then, to make matters worse, we discovered that his mom hadn't really drowned like she was believed to have done; she had been taken over by a Yeerk. Not just any Yeerk, though; the strongest Yeerk general, Visser One. The Yeerk in her head was even more powerful than Visser Three, the leader of Earth's invasion. More recently she was demoted, but we don't know to what rank, so we still refer to her as Visser One. Udrak didn't pay much attention to ranks, and I couldn't have cared less, so we didn't help the others much in that respect.

Look, Marco - I'm sorry. I went too far, Rachel apologized. She must have thought of his mom, too.

You bet you did.

Hey, guys, hasn't it been nearly two hours? Cassie cut in. She shook her head, letting her mane fly where it would. She was a horse - in fact, she was a throughbred, one that could probably win the Kentucky Derby.

Yes. Eighteen minutes remain, Aximili said.

We took our time morphing back. If you watch a morph and don't know what's happening, it'd probably give you nightmares for the rest of your life. Physical features melt together, pop in - and out - suddenly and without warning, bones switch position and stretch/shrink, and I don't want to even think what else (especially in cases such as Marco and his female wolf morph, or any of our insect morphs). Like, after about a minute Rachel had her hair and normal limbs, but she still had a snake head, glaring reddish eyes, and dark green, leathery skin that hung off her like balloons. Marco was human except for an arch in his back and all that fur. I still had my tail, I couldn't stand upright, and my nose was still pretty far away from my face, but I had no more fur. Tobias looked especially weird, with dark green feathers, red eyes that were way too big for his hawk head, talons that were bigger than he was, and claws hanging off his wings.

Cassie has a knack with morphing. She isn't as fast as me, but then, she wouldn't want to be. But she's faster than the others - and she can control how she morphs, something I envy greatly. Aximili took a glance at her and cried out, By the orba! His eyes were smiling - no, grinning.

You see, Cassie's upper body was fully un-morphed, but she still had her horse's legs and tail. She'd then stopped the morph there - if you break concentration, the changes stop - and was standing with her

hands on her... uh, horse-shoulders. She looked like a centaur - or a weird, tailless Andalite.

She put an arm around Ax's shoulders and grinned. "We could be twins!"

Aximili returned the grin with his eyes. Not so, Cassie. You look like you were hit with a Dracon beam were there the setting 'deep fry'! We all laughed at that: Aximili isn't usually very good at making jokes. That was probably one of his best ones.

"Ugh ha au eyes," Rachel scolded. While she spoke, though, her Hork-Bajir mouth and tongue were forming into her human ones, so what she said was garbled. Her normal nose sprouted from the middle of her face. Clearing her throat, she repeated, "Come on, you guys. Stop fooling, Cassie. Let's go, Ax - it's your turn to be morphed for awhile."

We could hear Aximili sigh in our heads. Hiding is the worst part of this, other than fighting the Yeerks, he complained, his voice dangerously close to a whine. Still, as Cassie's front legs began to shrivel up, so did Aximili's. Rachel and I helped steady him until he got his balance.

When the others first began morphing, it was pretty embarrassing because they couldn't morph clothing, too. Now they knew how to morph with skin-tight stuff, but they're still working on shoes. I'm lucky - I can wear my wetsuits, which have built-in "shoes". The rubber pads on the bottom of the feet aren't so great, but it's better than being barefoot. Thing is, Aximili has to morph into a human, and, needless to say, he used to be as naked then as he is as an Andalite. However, he managed to incorporate clothing into his human morph, so he's relatively decent when he becomes human. Still, none of us have been able to morph shoes, much less warm clothing.

We were prepared, though. We had a stash of clothes for ourselves - after all, it'd look pretty weird for us to walk around in skin-tight clothes this late in autumn.

Just as everyone else was putting on shoes and I was pulling my sweater over my head (Mia insisted I wear a sweater; she's sweet and really means well, so I didn't argue), we heard a voice say, "It is too cold to have nothing on you feet, Jake."

I whirled around. It was Ikell.

How the heck-?

She chuckled a thumb over her shoulder as if to answer my unspoken question. "I am living on the other side of these woods. A little over two miles from here." She turned her head sharply to look at Jake, then demanded, "Why do you wear no shoes?"

He looked down at his bare feet. He still hadn't gotten that far, while the others had. "I thought - I, uh - had stones in them," he replied, no doubt feeling like an idiot.

"I see." She shrugged it off, which seemed a little weird, but no weirder than she looked. She lifted her chin a little higher, as if to look impressive or something. Suddenly, she turned her head

sharply to look at Rachel. With short jerks of her head she looked at each of us. "I heard someone mention 'The _orba_'. " Aximili cringed. "Who - or what - are they?"

"_Orba_" Rachel repeated blankly.

Ikell's glare turned on her. "That is what it sounded like. I could be- incorrect. Mistaken." Her voice was starting to sound clipped again.

"Why?" Aximili asked. He had a very serious expression on his face. "Does it have a special mee-ning-uh to you?" His improvement in speaking aloud was obvious; he doesn't repeat sounds in order to accustom himself to using them nearly as much as he used to, and has caught on that most people think that his playing with sounds is weird. I caught a hint of suspicion... maybe even a hint of _hatred_... in his voice, which surprised me. What was going on? Aximili doesn't usually get worked up about much. Except the Yeerks, of course.

"Yes," Ikell replied quietly. She turned away from us, seemingly oblivious to Aximili's odd way of speaking. "It does." All expression just disappeared from her face and voice. "It means a great deal to me."

Rachel ran up to her and placed her hand gently on her shoulder. "What is it?" she asked quietly.

Ikell turned her face away from Rachel, and for some reason I had the oddest feeling she was showing her neck, like a wolf will do when it knows it can't stand up to another wolf. She muttered something I couldn't hear, then roughly shook Rachel's hand from her shoulder and ran back the way she had come. She didn't run fast, and she had a definite limp. Her heels never hit the ground.

Rachel walked back to us slowly. Tobias - whom Ikell had somehow overlooked - flew from his place on a log to perch on her shoulder. What is it? he asked.

"Orba was her sister," Rachel said. She took a deep, shaky breath, then exhaled slowly. "Her exact words were, 'Orba, dearest sister. The one they took away - just like the others.'" Rachel looked around at us. "There's something going on with her - something in Ikell's past is haunting her so badly that... that... well, just look at her! So help me, I'm going to find out what!"

She then turned to Ax. "Now, what are 'The _orba_?' " she demanded.

CHAPTER 12

Ax sat down on the fallen tree Marco had moved. "The _orbai_ is an extinct race," He spoke slowly to make it easier for all of us. He repeated sounds a lot, but I won't add them. There are too many in this, and they really aren't important. "It became that way so long ago that not much is remembered about them. Some even contest their very existence."

"But what do _you_ know about them?" Rachel insisted.

"Even less." He physically sighed, something he could do in human morph but was awkward when he was an Andalite, since he had no mouth. "Now I wish I had paid closer attention to my teacher," he muttered. He paused, then began.

"About a thousand centuries ago, a treaty was written between my ancestors and a race known as the _orbai_. It is believed by a tiny minority that they, in some way, gave us the foundation of knowledge we needed to create the morphing technology - but the _orbai_ were thought to be shape-shifting race and therefore would have had no use for it - and that is not to mention that they died long before we were even sentient. Andalites were not Andalites a thousand centuries ago. Our planet was not even where it is now. It is thought that it is perhaps an exaggeration-

"Ax," I interrupted him. "Focus."

He got back on track. "Soon after, two factions - sort of like an extension of a clan - declared war on each other. One began calling themselves the Orkhei, or 'Injusticed', and the other, Bajira, or 'Betrayed'.

"The sides did two things in common:

One - they took more primal shapes to avoid the usage of weapons but to defend themselves just the same, and:

Two - they both asked all other peoples for aid.

"The ancestors of the Andalites refused in both cases, hoping to stay neutral. The Bajira understood and even complimented them on their choice, but the Orkhei took it personally, and broke all ties with any but themselves.

"After 4,000 years of bloodshed, the war concluded with the Orkhei victorious: the Bajira were nearly completely destroyed. This was estimated to be about fifty thousand of your years ago.

"Those who had fought soon realized that their shape-shifting abilities were gone. As a peaceful act, the Orkhei combined the names of the two factions to name the race they had become. What remained of the Bajira saw this as a way to mock them, so they named themselves otherwise, and ever since they have been utter enemies. Only the war against the Yeerks brought them together, though for a saddeningly short time."

"Four thousand years of war," Marco muttered. "And we thought four_-year_ world wars were bad."

"What about other factions?" Cassie asked. "Wouldn't _they_ still exist?"

"I don't remember why," Aximili replied, "but they allied themselves to either one side or the other. Some form of duty they had." Aximili obviously considered this explanation enough: Andalites are very interested in duty.

"You said they combined their names to rename their race," Jake said. "Does that mean that they are the *_Hork-Bajir_*?" I forced myself not to laugh: that was silly. There were no other sentient races on

the Hork-Bajir homeworld. It was nonsense.

"Yes, Prince Jake, that is so." A "prince" to Andalites is really just a leader. Even though he means it with respect, Jake doesn't like it when Aximili calls him that. Then Aximili shrugged. "But I believe you can see why it is only a myth. Andalites have not known of the existence of Hork-Bajir for even a century, much less a few thousand years. Their discovery simply made for a good ending to the story."

Of course, the Ellimists were a myth, too, Tobias said.

"Hey, Marco," Rachel put in as she punched him in the arm, "if they were a shape-shifting race, that means they weren't always 'Walking Salad-Shooters from Hell'."

"Oh, yeah?" he answered, returning the punch, "maybe, in their true form, they looked like Walking Lawnmowers from Hell."

"Oh, no," Aximili cut in. "The orbai were a peaceful race, as the Hork-Bajir were after them. It is believed that they were much smaller - no taller than Cassie is - with more delicate bodies and no blades. They were highly evolved - as evolved as Andalites are now -" Here we humans traded glances and forced ourselves not to laugh "- and had no need for physical adaptations such as that." Ax took a deep breath: he had never said so much aloud at once. "They wore only flowing robes of all colors, to regulate their body temperature, not to hide parts of their bodies from each other as humans do: they were a very delicate race, even more so than humans. Much more so than Andalites, and ridiculously so, compared to Hork-Bajir. Family meant everything to them."

"It sounds beautiful," Cassie sighed. "It's so sad that they're gone."

Ax shook his head. "Sad is not enough to describe how their loss - if they even existed - affected my people. Without them, the war against the Yeerks is terribly hard."

Why? asked Tobias. How could they help?

Ax's answer tied my stomach in a knot.

"They could tell who was a Controller, and who was not."

Marco gaped. "How?"

Ax shrugged. "Supposedly, they could feel the thought waves of other races, or something to that effect. Something like thought-speech, but stronger. No one really knows anymore - and those that claim to know tend to disagree. One of the few things that is agreed upon is that they probably spoke with a thought-speech that was stronger than even that of my people."

Too bad, Tobias said. We could really use one of them.

"You can say that again," Marco added. "It would make our job a lot easier."

"Just think," Rachel said quietly, "we would know who we could and

could not trust. We could tell if our families had been Controller-ized."

Sort of like the Leerans, Tobias pointed out. Leerans are a telepathic, frog-like race the others have run into a few times. They saved them once from the Yeerks when they were trying to take over their planet.

"Could we talk about something else?" Cassie begged. "I'm starting to feel really depressed."

"Speaking of depressing, why were you talking to Ikell all of a sudden, Rachel?" Marco spoke up. "I mean, other than the fact that she needs all the help she can get."

"I'd like to be her friend. I mean, she's new around here, and she's probably lonely. In fact," she added proudly, "I invited her to Cassie's and my sleepover tonight."

"**_What???!_**!" we all cried - except for Cassie, of course, who knew.

Doing something spontaneous can be expected from Rachel, but such an act of unaimed kindness was very un-Rachelish.

"You heard me. I figure that she needs someone she can talk to, a friend who'll be there for her. I want to be that friend."

"Are you sure?" Marco asked. "Or are you just so curious about her past that you aren't thinking?"

She glared at him. "I admit," she replied, "that her past is one of my original reasons to keep talking to her. Maybe it still is. But I'm also thinking of Ikell as a person. Everyone needs a friend - and I think Ikell is one person who needs one more than anything right now." She glanced at Aximili and me. We all knew that he knew what she was talking about, even if neither of us said anything. With the others Aximili and I tend to be cool toward each other, because what we shared they can never understand. But they know, and leave us alone about it. They're cool that way.

"Yeah," Marco snorted. "Even if it's you." Rachel took a fake swing at his face, and he ducked.

"Cut it out, you two," Jake said in a fatherly tone of patience.

Turning to Rachel, I asked, "Did she accept?"

"It took a lot of convincing," she admitted. "Ikell's just too darn reclusive and paranoid for her own good."

I frowned. "You'd better watch it, though. If Erek says we should watch her, we have to watch her. I don't know why, but the Chee are pretty trustworthy." Nobody mentioned my understatement. "They don't feel right about Ikell, so we should watch ourselves, too."

"You know, I think she likes Jake," Marco said for no apparent reason. Seeing Jake's dirty expression, he added, "Listen before you start swinging at me, too. She talks to you and Rachel, right? Don't

glare - I saw the two of you at lunch for the past three days now! I mean, she talks to Rachel because Rachel's talking to her, but why is she talking to you? Your dashing good looks? Your witty sense of humor? Oh, wait - that's me."

"News flash," Jake replied, forcing himself not to smile at Marco's only partially exaggerated vanity. "Thanks to this interstellar war, my grades are, as of this moment, in the graveyard. I've been assigned a student tutor."

Cassie's face lit up as she understood what was going on. "Ikell?" she asked.

"Exactly. So she has to teach me things that are way over my head. And it'd be pretty hard if she didn't tell me what to do."

"And if she is going to tutor you," Aximili added, "she can't hide from you at the same time." He moved his mouth around in a way that looked uncomfortable. "Tu_tor_," he echoed himself. "_Tu_."

There he goes again, I thought.

"Exactly," Jake said again, smiling. "And don't call me 'prince', Ax."

"As you wish, Prince Jake."

CHAPTER 13

Though the boys weren't there, Rachel and Cassie agreed that I should be there, and all but Marco agreed that the three of us would give the boys the details of the sleepover. If Marco had his way, of course, we wouldn't have had to. But Tobias, Ax, and Jake - not to mention Rachel, Cassie, and I - were completely against crashing it. At first, though, Ax wasn't certain what we meant by crashing.

Comparing Marco's plan to the one he used for a certain pool party was enough explanation. Crashing seems a very unlucky thing to do, he had said in a very serious voice.

Ikell arrived at Cassie's house exactly on time, carrying only a small duffel bag. Her hair was tied back away from her face. Cassie's mom answered the door.

"Hello," she said. "You must be Ikell."

"Yes, I am," was the reply. "Is Cassie or Rachel here?"

"They're in the living room, waiting for you." Seeing her worried expression, she added, "Rachel came home with Cassie so they could do their homework together. Casey's here, too - she arrived early."

"I see."

Cassie's mom moved aside. "Come on in."

"Thank you." Ikell then joined Cassie, Rachel, and me in the living room, where we were sitting among bowls of popcorn, pretzels, and other movie-watching snacks. "Hello," she greeted us with a faint

smile. It looked forced.

"Hi, Ikell. Glad you could come," Rachel replied, returning the smile.

"You have a great many animals," Ikell said, talking to Cassie. She held her head at a slight angle, as if she couldn't see us very well. "I could... hear them in your barn. Are they all yours?"

Cassie shook her head. "We have some horses and a cow, but the rest are wild. My parents are vets, and I help out with the chores."

"Ah." Ikell sat down with us on the floor. Seeing the pile of boxes on the floor, she asked, "What sort of movies did you rent?"

"The usual - some horror films and a couple of Disney Classics," I replied.

Ikell nodded. She took a piece of popcorn from one of the snack bowls. "What is first?"

"Horror," Rachel said quickly. Cassie stuck the tape into the player.

Every once in a while, I glanced at Ikell. Her face was unreadable throughout the movie, even at the really gross parts. It didn't change for the next three movies, which included Stalker at Corner Point, one of the goriest movies of all time, and Beauty and the Beast. Then I glanced at Ikell during Lion King, at the point where Simba's dad dies. I noticed that a... I don't know. The only way to describe it was that a deep sadness had come over Ikell, but her eyes remained totally dry. She just sat there, transfixed, looking like someone had stabbed her. Like she wanted to cry, but couldn't. Like she was seeing something she'd seen far too many times and had never wished to see.

I watched her more than the movies after that. Pumbaa and Timon brought on a faint but real smile. The climax found her unreadable again. The last two horror flicks, which were pretty short, left her as cold as before. By then, it was 3:00 am, and we were all yawning. While Ikell was in the bathroom getting ready for bed, Cassie, Rachel, and I held a whispered forum.

"Did you see her during the horror movies?" Cassie asked. "She didn't even bat an eye."

"You saw that too? It was like it was old news to her," Rachel said.

"Maybe it is. Remember how she said her brothers died in a war?" I pointed out. "There's no knowing what she saw if she lived in the war zone - I mean, she said it was safest she was here, right? Sounds like the war was in her backyard. She could have seen people tortured to death, for all we know."

"I did, and worse." We looked up to see Ikell in the doorway, dressed in baggy pajamas. Her expression was as cold and impassive as ever. "I have seen things you could not imagine in your worst nightmares. People say that I am cold, humorless. None will say it to my face,

but I have- I have learned over my lifetime to listen." She knelt down with us. "You must trust me when I say that my life's tale makes all of those 'horror' movies seem like- like the campfire stories - horrible, but fake, a parody of life." She was stiff, unmoving, so cold that Rachel and Cassie had to fight to keep from shaking.

I didn't.

Udrak had been that way sometimes.

After a pause, Cassie said, "We're willing to listen."

"I can tell no one," she replied, staring at her knees. Her voice sounded almost like she was snapping, but at the same time it was like she was fighting as hard as she could not to cry. "You would think me crazy. In a way I am. I am crazy to think I can remain anonymous when my mind fights with itself. I am crazy to think I can hide here, where it seems safe, because it is not. I am crazy in ways you could not understand. The war I ran away from will follow me no matter where in the universe I run, as much as another, more personal war will always be with me." She looked at us then, and through her coldness it was impossible to miss the thankfulness in her eyes. But, even though her eyes seemed almost happy, I was sure Ikell wasn't really looking at any of us. It was like her eyes weren't able to focus, almost as if she was staring right through us and smiling at the wall. "But thank you for being here for me. I have nothing left." Her voice cracked when she said that last sentence, as did her strict face - and she smiled. Not faintly or forced, but just smiled. It did a lot for her pale, odd face.

*

When I woke up Saturday, I saw that Ikell was not there. It was only 7:30 am, and I felt groggy. Not bad, really - just a little out of it. I don't sleep much - a habit that's become a way of life for me. I just have too much to accomplish to waste time sleeping. Still, I half-stumbled downstairs to find Cassie's parents at the kitchen table, drinking coffee. Something wasn't right.

"Mr. _____," I said, "shouldn't you be out feeding the troops?" Cassie had said that her dad usually got up around seven o'clock to give the animals their food and medication. She usually helped, but because of the sleepover she'd been given permission to sleep in.

"I was out half an hour ago, and they were all done. Barns spotless, too, except for the stalls. Your red-haired friend is a good worker."

I had to put my mind in order. Rachel was blonde, Cassie black-haired, and both had been in Cassie's room. Who...? Then it clicked. "Ikell?" I gasped. Quite suddenly I was awake. "Why? I mean, to get everything done, she'd have to been up at -"

"5:00 am," he replied. "At least, that's what she said."

"That's less than two hours sleep," her mom said unhappily. "That's unhealthy for a growing girl."

"She seems healthy enough," her dad said, shrugging. "Maybe it was a one-time thing."

I smiled in reply. "I'll go see what she's up to." With that, I ran upstairs, got dressed, and went outside to the barn. It was freezing outside and still pretty dark. The sky in the east was just starting to turn pink and gold, turning the storm clouds strange colors. It hadn't started to rain yet, but it was definitely going to.

As I stepped into the barn, I realized that Cassie's father hadn't been exaggerating. Except for some pieces of hay here and there, the place was sparkling clean. Very un-Cassie's-barn-like. "Ikell?"

Her head popped up from one of the horse's stalls. Her bright red hair was loose and full of hay. "Good morning, Casey," she said. "Everything is done but medicating the animals. I do not have the knowledge needed to do that."

"But...why?"

"Why did I clean the barn? Habit, I suppose, from the mother- my mother country. From- from- from the camp." She was shivering so badly she was stuttering. She came out of the stall, a laden, stinky shovel in her hands. I gasped, recoiling slightly.

It was the first time any of us had seen Ikell out of her usual baggy outfits. Instead she wore cut-off jeans and a ratty, sleeveless tee-shirt with the bottom half ripped off. Her muscles were tight against very large, very visible bones. It made me feel so sick I couldn't speak.

When you've watched people morph into bugs and how Visser Three deals with those that disappoint him, not to mention half the _other_ things I've seen since being a Controller, let's just say the strength of your stomach goes up a few notches. To say that Ikell's scrawniness made me sick is a major thing.

Ikell walked outside with the heavily-loaded shovel and dumped it on top of the compost heap next to the barn. When she returned, I managed to cry, "Are you anorexic, or bulimic, or something? You look like living skeleton!"

Ikell looked down at herself blankly for a moment before her eyes closed slowly. She leaned heavily on the shovel handle. "In- the camp," she began quietly, "you were fed just enough to survive. And whatever you could scrape off the bottom of the pots when you had kitchen duty.

"But I was young, and strong. I was a worker, a soldier. While in the camp I got little time in the kitchen. In the field, there was no such thing - just bitter, skimpy rations." She let this sink in. "And everything was done in shifts that lasted about four hours. There were three shifts per person: two you worked, one you slept. If you were found awake during your sleeping shift, you were sent to work." She stood up straight again, making a low sound in her throat like a growl. I think she was clearing her throat. "That explains a lot about me, I should think."

Once again, I couldn't say a word.

What do you say to something like that?

Ikell picked up another shovel and threw it to me. "We can finish more quickly together." She frowned as she shoved the shovel into the manure. "And I can tell you more later, if you still so desire," she added quietly. I nodded in reply, but she didn't see.

We worked in complete silence, each with our own thoughts.

CHAPTER 14

"And to add to the sickness of it all," Rachel finished, "all she had for breakfast was two pieces of plain toast and a big glass of tap water."

"_Plain_ toast?" Marco asked. He shuddered. "That _is_ sick."

We were at Jake's house, in the attic. His parents were out doing early Christmas shopping and had dragged Tom along. Ikell wasn't going to be coming over for Jake's first tutorial for another day. The blinds weren't drawn because closed spaces make Tobias feel uncomfortable, but the window was closed against the deluge of rain outside. Since our meeting was supposed to last over two hours, Aximili was unmorphed and laying on the floor, so he couldn't be seen from the window. Because we were in the attic, we didn't have to worry about anyone looking in and seeing a red-tailed hawk perching on a dusty dresser and a human-deer-scorpion-like alien laying on the floor. The door was locked, just in case Jake's family came home early.

We know Tom is a Controller, but we don't know about Jake's folks. With Yeerks, you can't be too careful - especially when you know all about what's going on.

Funny how we're talking about some new kid who's had it tough instead of Hork-Bajir, Taxxons, or Yeerks, Tobias mentioned.

It was strange hearing that out of Tobias. His family consisted of an uncle here and an aunt on the other side of the country who had always been trying to shove him on each other. Then he became trapped in the Yeerk pool and in turn became trapped in a red-tailed hawk's body, sharing its mind.

"Yeerks and Taxxons and Hork-Bajir, oh my," Marco quipped. Cassie giggled, I rolled my eyes, and Aximili looked confused. "Seriously, though," Marco continued, "you've got to admit - Ikell's just as weird."

"She told us at breakfast that she was from the European-Asian border, in a place called 'Fushatet', or something like that. It meant 'No man's land'. It's a place where there's been border wars since World War I," Cassie said.

Ax looked disturbed. That is very close to a Hork-Bajir term I heard many times. _Fuushekket_. It meant 'imprisonment'. Where was it? Ah - the day we Andalites lost them to the Yeerks. It was known as the _Fuushekket_.

"But why haven't we heard about it?" I asked. This didn't sound believable. It hadn't sat well with me when I had heard it, and still didn't. "You'd think it would be on the news."

"Think about it. If it were, it'd kill Eurasian tourism in one stroke," Cassie replied, "so they keep it completely hush-hush."

"She was born and raised in that camp she kept mentioning," Rachel continued. "She was the third of nine children."

Marco whistled. "Talk about family life."

I had Elfangor, Ax thought-spoke. I can't imagine life with nine times as many siblings. Ax was a little speechless when he learned Rachel had two sisters. Andalites are really into birth control, I guess.

"I wouldn't talk so fast," Rachel warned. "Remember, she lived in a concentration camp."

Didn't she say that Orba and the rest were taken away? Tobias asked.

"And that her twin brothers died?" Marco added.

"Man," I said. "It's amazing she's still sane." I thought about Udrak, and myself, and fell silent.

We were all silent for a while, then Aximili said, It sounds much like working under the lower Vissers.

"Really?" Rachel said, raising her eyebrows. "How?"

Well, from what we know- what I know, he explained, those that would never rebel against the Yeerks, those that they trust completely, - like the Taxxons - are allowed to work free, as non-Controllers, on their ships. To keep those that would not rebel because their spirits were broken and are too weak to be hosts from getting any ideas, they feed them just enough to keep them on their feet and work them as much as possible until they either gain the strength to become hosts or die.

"It's true," I said. "Sometimes there aren't enough Yeerks to go around, and sometimes it's the opposite. When there's too many slugs and not enough bodies, you get waiting lines. When there's too many hosts and not enough Controllers, you either kill the excess or make use of them without wasting resources. As I've said - it's all about efficiency."

"That's terrible," Cassie shuddered.

"But then, that's just like the Yeerks, isn't it?" Marco said bitterly. "Exactly the kind of thing you'd expect." I scowled, but did not retort.

Rachel looked at her watch. "I've really got to go," she said. "I have gymnastics in an hour and have to get ready." Then she groaned. "Oh, man! Mom can't drive me home today. I can't walk home alone again - and I do not want Chapman driving me home again, either."

"What's wrong with walking home alone?" I asked.

Marco was about to quip something, but Rachel cut him off. "Creeps like Marco," she said.

"Oh." I shrugged. "If I tag along, would you feel better? It's not like I have anything better to do."

Rachel smiled. "Yeah, that'd be great."

CHAPTER 15

I leaned on the doorframe to the gym room, or whatever they call it. Because I was at the Y, the place smelled like sweat, chlorine, and rubber floor mats.

Rachel was using the vault, flipping and handspringing over the horse. Looking around, I was surprised to see Ikell, sitting on the floor next to the balance beam, stretching. She'd tied her hair so it folded in half, then tucked it in the back of her bodysuit. She stood and walked across the room. She then began to run, sprinting across the floor faster than I would have thought she'd be able to run on her toes, and flipped over the springboard to land on the thin beam on her hands. Yes, I said over - she didn't touch it. She actually jumped into the air, flipped, and grabbed onto a beam that was a few inches wide and about five feet in the air without a springboard, and managed to keep her balance. She leaned backwards, arching her back until her feet touched the beam. Then it was a simple matter of arching all the way over and letting go with her hands to get back on her feet. Her way of standing on her toes seemed to be perfect for keeping her balance on the narrow beam - she didn't wobble at all. She did a few simple (that's to say, simple-looking) handsprings across the beam, then a handless cartwheel. A few of the kids in the room stopped to watch, Rachel and Melissa Chapman, Iniss Two-two-six's host's daughter, included. Ikell landed flawlessly. She cartwheeled her way back to the other side. Next she ran down the beam and did a front flip, twisted around in mid-air, and landed facing the way she had come. A few people gasped, and their coach looked like she'd have a heart attack any minute. After all, Ikell is a bit taller than Rachel and built like a brick; according to Rachel, someone like her isn't supposed to be able to do things like that with that much flawless precision. If at all. That was why Rachel'd been a little surprised when Ikell did such a clean "walkover", or whatever she called that arched-back thing (sometime later).

Ikell suddenly noticed the attention she was receiving, and swayed a little. She did a few back handsprings to get to the other side. Turning around, she did a cartwheel, three back handsprings, then leapt off both feet to do a double front flip without tucking and twisted 540 degrees (or, to put it another way, rotated one and a half times) to land without a stumble. Everyone began to clap, and Ikell cringed, blushing, turning her face and ears red with a purple undertone. She actually looked pretty normal.

"That was magnificent!" the coach cried. "Who was your coach before?"

"I had no coach," Ikell said, saying the last word as if it were unfamiliar. She was obviously not enjoying the attention she was getting. "Acrobatics is a... a pastime of mine. A hobby."

"Can you use any of the other equipment?" the coach persisted.

"A fewâ€¦ perhaps."

I ended up standing there for another half an hour. Ikell was no less than amazing on the uneven bars and the horizontal bar, but not so great at the parallel bars.

It was the vault that was her definite calling, though. She barely touched the spring board each time she went off, but what she did in midair - flips, twists, handless cartwheels - made you think she had no backbone or something. She was flying. Each one of her jumps were at least twice as high as Rachel's had been. Though, considering how she'd gotten on the balance beam, I guess I shouldn't have been surprised.

Finally, she sat down and sighed. "Enough - my lungs were never in good shape," she muttered, wheezing slightly.

The coach clapped her on the shoulder. "There is a competition later this week. You should enter - with moves like that...."

Ikell shook her head quickly. Her voice took on that clipped sound again as she said, "No. Absolutely not. I do not do such things." She sounded panicked. She took a deep, shaky breath, calming herself down. "It was... enjoyable, but..." She shook her head again. "I cannot. I will not. I am afraid it would be most unfair to all involved." She stood up and stretched. She was wearing a full-body stretch suit, one without stirrups, and it fit very tightly. I had to look away: she was all sinew, bone, and very thin muscle. Pretty gross.

The coach sighed. "It's your funeral. You could go far with abilities like those."

Ikell smiled slightly. "I'm afraid I have an unfair advantage over any competition. As I have said, I am sorry, but... no." She walked toward the doorway, head down. I jumped back before she walked into me, and she jerked her head up. "Casey!" she gasped. She bit down so hard on the first syllable I flinched. "What are you here for?"

"Rachel's ride isn't coming, so I was asked to walk home with her."

"Ah." She nodded. "Rachel and I were going to study together after we got changed. Do you mind if I am along?"

"No problem," I replied. "The more the merrier."

She gave me one of her infrequent smiles. "Thank you. See you in a few minutes." She left for the locker room.

The rest of the class followed a minute or so later, chattering about Ikell's "amazing" abilities. She came out soon after, still pulling down the bottom of her sweatshirt. Her hair was sticking up in places from the static: let me tell you, with hair as long as hers was, it was one of the silliest things I've ever seen.

She hurried over to me. "Rachel will be here soon," she said, pulling on her coat. "You would not believe how easily some people are

impressed." She looked at me, and frowned. I was trying to suppress my urge to laugh at her hair, sticking in all directions like it was. "What is it?" she asked, sounding disturbed, almost wary, as if something was seriously wrong.

I snickered, unable to help myself. "Your hair. It's full of static."

She looked up, as if she could see it. "Oh my," she said. I snickered again: her voice was as deadpan as ever, making her sound just like Marco. She patted down her hair, but it was still sticking up. "Excuse me," she said, then went to the bathroom.

Rachel came out of the locker room just as Ikell closed the door. She came up to me. "Ikell said she'd meet me out here: we were going to do our homework together tonight. Where'd she go?"

"Bathroom," I said. "Bad case of static."

She gave me a funny look, but then Ikell came out of the bathroom, her hair dampened. "Had to get some water on it," she said, shrugging. "Can we go?" Rachel shrugged, and leaned down to pick up her bag, pausing to zip it shut. Ikell was hopping from foot to foot. "Are we going?" she asked impatiently. She glanced over her shoulder at two girls I didn't know. "The sooner my homework is done the better. No offense intended, Rachel - it is the homework I despise, not your company."

"And I didn't take it that way," she said, shrugging. "If you're in such a hurry, let's go." She shouldered her bag, and Ikell shifted her own to her back. Finally we all headed out the door toward the neighborhood where Rachel lives.

About halfway there, a small car pulled over a little ahead of us. Ikell stopped in her tracks. "It is Edward," she hissed. She grabbed one of Rachel's arms and one of mine. "We must retreat."

"Who's Edward?" I asked, confused.

"My foster brother," Ikell muttered darkly.

"Why?" Rachel asked just as quietly. "I thought you said you could whip his butt, no problem." Obviously, I had not been part of the conversation where that had been said, since I didn't even know Ikell had a foster brother.

"Resisting temptation is always the better route, my friend - that is a fundamental rule. Let us, as they say, split." She kept hold of our arms as she turned ninety degrees around and began to run.

Right toward the construction sight.

CHAPTER 16

The construction sight was where the others met the Andalite prince and watched as Visser Three - leader of the Yeerk invasion here - devoured him. It was where the five of them were chased down by Hork-Bajir warriors and Taxxons (which look like twelve-foot long centipedes). It was where Jake came this close to being decapitated by a Hork-Bajir elbow or wrist blade, so that his head could be used

as identification.

None of us, under any circumstance (except maybe running from the Yeerks again), would be caught dead - or preferably alive - there. Even Aximili and I avoid it. Rachel and I did our best to dig our heels into the road.

"No_ way_, Ikell," Rachel said, trying to pry Ikell's iron grip off her arm. "You are not going to drag us in there."

"Would you rather be beaten to an unidentifiable mass by Edward's 'friends'?" she snapped, glaring at her.

I was surprised at how much venom was in her voice. She was beginning to make me feel on edge again. Ereka's warning played through my head; how could I have forgotten? "It'd be safer than going in there," I insisted. "There are some pretty desperate people in there."

"Fine. I'll save your spineless necks then." Her voice was almost friendly all of a sudden. She let go of us and began to walk, head high, back to the sidewalk. Rachel and I turned to see that she was facing off against five guys, all but one a lot taller and all of them looking much tougher than she did. The two of us just stood there in the road, looking dumb.

She reached the sidewalk, dropped her bag, and glared at them, with a glare that could make a Taxxon lose its appetite - no small feat. One of the bullies backed off a bit. I guessed then that she might actually be tougher than they were after all.

I recognized the kid that stepped forward as one of last year's graduates from my school - Will Ford.

"Listen up, twerp," he growled at Ikell. "Word is, you're making a bad name for our little leaguers, namely your ol' 'brother' here. And do you know what we do to hot shot little twerps like you?"

She let loose a few choice things I dare not print and a lot I didn't quite understand. As you've probably noticed, Ikell tends to talk kind of funny. The gist of it was, "And do you want to get your sorry little butts kicked all the way to Otursha IX and back? Oh, I forgot - you idiots wouldn't be able to find your way back. I can see it now. 'Dweebs rocketed to kingdom come: world rejoices.'"

He stepped closer to her, his eyes narrowed. "Do you have a death wish, geek?"

Hers did as well. Her cold, green-yellow gaze did not look human. "Do you?" she asked quietly.

I finally managed to move, and went over to Ikell. I had a very bad feeling that she really, really wanted to fight. Rachel might be a little ballistic sometimes, but even she's wise enough not to take on five guys bigger than she is - besides the fact that Rachel doesn't usually start the fights in the first place: she just makes sure they finish in her favor. I touched Ikell's arm. "Come on. Let's beat it." She glared at me, eyes still narrowed, and her upper lip twitched a little, like she was about to growl at me but decided not to.

"I have a better idea," Will said. "Let's beat you, you little...." He called me something very not-nice. Something masculine.

Hey, what did I look like, Jake? Marco? Just because my hair was short, did he think I was a guy??_

--

He grabbed the front of my shirt. I saw two others go and grab Rachel, one on each of her arms. The other two advanced on Ikell.

Then I heard something I'll never forget.

Ikell snarled. I mean, she snarled like a wild cat or something even more fearsome - something definitely not human. I turned my head to see that she was snarling at the two guys coming at her - two really big guys I didn't know. Her upper lip was pulled back, and her hands were like... she held them tensed, like she had claws or something, and was about to use them. I guess you could describe her as looking like a human version of what Jake would look like in his tiger morph. Or like a really short Hork- Bajir.

How I wished I could have used a morph - any morph - right at that moment, as I saw Will's fist coming to blacken my right eye.

I opened the other one after the painful contact just in time to see Ikell use one of her vault leaps to slam into the bigger of the two guys' middle. She slashed at his face with her hand, and he cried out. I did, too, as I saw Will's fist wind up to give me a matching pair of eyes...

...then I was on the ground, still with only one black eye, but the air was completely knocked out of me. I saw Ikell with her knee pressed against Will's neck. He had four, slightly bleeding scratches down one side of his face. "Call your filth off," she growled. Her hair was messed up again, but it didn't look funny this time - it looked alive. It made her look wild, dangerous. Very dangerous.

"Lay off, guys," he croaked. One guy backed away from all of us, cowering.

The guys that had Rachel threw her a few curses before letting her go, and she gave some nasty remarks back - she can swear nearly as good as Ikell, trust me. The guys had come out worse than Rachel had: from what I could tell, she had fought tooth and nail, and came out of it with only a couple scratches and a split lip.

Why was I the only one of us that got pounded?

Ikell didn't move. "Listen to me, and listen well," she snarled. She still didn't sound at all human. Her voice was deeper than mine - heck, it was deeper than my dad's had been. "I want you to take your filth and go back to whatever dead planet you dared to step off of. Because trust me - I don't like bullies. In fact, I really hate bullies. I eat bullies when I'm in a bad mood. Be glad you caught me in a settled frame of mind." She leaned her face closer to his. "Do you get my drift, twerp?" she breathed, the venom in her voice changed into a sweetness that seemed a million times more

poisonous.

He was trembling. I mean, he was trembling. He'd probably wet his pants. If I were him, I probably would have - Ikell was that scary right then. Forget that I've faced Taxxons, Hork-Bajir, Visser Three, a few of his more terrifying morphs that the others had better pray they never see - I'm just glad I'd never made Ikell mad. "Yeah, sure," he croaked. He attempted to smile. "You know, we could use some-"

She pushed her knee a little farther into his throat, and he gagged, unable to finish his sentence. "Don't waste your foul breath on me, creep," she growled. "I will never join your * kind. The likes of you will never know me as 'friend'. And they will have no more power over me." (Fill in the "*" with what you like. Just make it really, really, really, really... "inappropriate", as my mom would have said.) She held her knee where it was for a moment longer, than stood up. She grabbed his wrist and yanked him to his feet so hard he almost fell on his face. "Now go slither back into whatever slime pit you dared to crawl out of, and stay away from me and my friends." She turned to us. I could tell she was fuming, but her voice was as emotionless and... not deep... as ever when she said, "You are right, Casey. We should go. Your eye needs some looking after." She glared at the group of bullies, and I glanced at them one last time.

I only saw four of them: the one who'd cowered away was missing. The other big guy's face, neck, and bare arms were all scratched up; Will's face was white and he had a black eye to match mine, as well as those scratches.

I decided then and there to stay on Ikell's good side. She could obviously get vicious. And could scare the heck out of you. Not to mention everything else.

Even after all I've been through, Ikell was able to scare me senseless. I never learned why.

For a while we walked on, totally silent, Ikell as tense as she had been during the fight with the gang. Rachel and I both avoided looking at her face for fear of what we'd see there. Then we turned a corner; she sighed and sat down right there, like someone had deflated her. She looked utterly exhausted, not to mention defeated. Like one of us had gotten killed, or something.

"I am sorry," she sighed. She sounded embarrassed and ashamed. "I... I should not have done that."

"It was either us or them," Rachel said, putting her hand on Ikell's shoulder. "You did the right thing."

"Too much," she said, shaking her head. "I went too far. They... most of them had no choice. Remember to pity all of them but Roger Henley." It took me a moment to recall that that was the name of the guy that had backed off for a moment, and one of those Rachel had had to deal with. Not the one who'd cowered - a different one.

"Why pity the little creep? I'll be the one who gets in - just you little jerks watch."

I looked up, surprised, but Ikell didn't even flinch: it was as if

she had heard him. "Edward. Why did you follow us, brother?"

"Don't call me that," our sudden companion snapped. It was the guy who'd split early, the one who had cowered when faced with Ikell's fury. "You don't call Fred that." Fred, I learned later, was their little brother. "And I followed you because I don't want you to go crying to Mommy that I tried to beat you up."

"You should know I would not do that. It would be false: it was Will and his friends that did this." She waved vaguely toward my eye and toward Rachel's lower lip, which was split. She looked up at him, her expression very sad. "And you should also know by now what I think of them."

"Forget it, shrimp," he snapped. "I ain't given up my place as a member of Will's elite corp."

"Elite?" She snorted. "The only thing elite about them is that Jerome comes from a family with a fortune. And you don't know them as well as you must."

"Oh, and what do you know, Miss Einstein?"

"More than I can say."

"How?"

"A knack I have," she snapped. She sighed again, and she looked like she was going to cry. "Please, you have to listen to me! You mustn't get involved with those- those rif'grat, those- those creeps." I stiffened. "It is more dangerous than you could ever imagine. You have more to lose than a little blood and the respect of the community."

"Get off my back, shrimp," he said with a snort. "You're worse than Mom."

"You bet I am," she replied. The way she was talking made me feel weird, as if there was more to what she said. She shook her head again and stood up. "Come on, guys. It is a lost cause. We had better get a compress on that eye, Casey."

She was right: I could barely see out of it, it was so swollen. "If you say so," I said, shrugging a little.

"Do not waste bravado with me, Casey: your dignity cannot get more bruised than your eye is." Rachel snickered. "Now come on." She turned to Edward. "Remember what I have said. At least think about my words - that is, if your primitive intellect can process it."

He raised his fist. "Do you want to look like your friend?"

She raised one of her claw-like hands a mere inch from his face. I had never realized how long her nails were. "Do you want to look worse than yours?" she hissed. "Leave me alone, you fool. Go lose your soul - see if I care. I have warned you, again and again. I am through with you."

"Finally!"

Her eyes narrowed into that make-Visser Three-tremble glare. We barely heard her words, she was so angry. "You will learn to regret that remark, Edward Garrison," she snarled under her breath. "Mark my words - one day soon you shall regret it with your heart and broken soul. Remember this moment for all time, little fool: you have thrown away your last chance!" She marched off, and Rachel and I ran to catch up.

"You're the one who'll be sorry, shrimp!"

We walked on, leaving him behind. Ikell shook her head sadly. "Yes, I will be," she whispered. "I will be sorry that I could not make you understand."

Once Edward was out of sight, Rachel said, "Ikell, what's going on? You've been acting weird all night."

"I wish I could tell you," she said, her eyes downcast, "but you would either know me to be crazy, or - logic forbid - believe me."

"What's wrong with that?" I asked.

"If you did believe me... a glance at the wrong moment, a slip of the tongue... you could be put in danger. I can not allow that." She looked at me, and I was able to watch as her eyes slowly focused on me. "You are my friends - all that I have - I cannot put you in danger. I will not have that on my conscience as well."

I expected Rachel to say something then, but she had a look on her face, one I recognized as the one she wears when she gets a potentially dangerous idea in her head. Because she was busy thinking and I got the idea that Ikell really didn't want to talk, it was quiet the rest of the way to Rachel's house.

One thing was very certain, though. Ikell knew something, something big and very dangerous. But was it the same thing as we knew... or something else?

Besides.... there was a matter of some of the things Ikell had said....

So I didn't really need to talk on the way home, either.

CHAPTER 17

I went over Rachel's house instead of right home, since my "homework" was done, and Rachel made an icepack by putting ice in a sandwich bag and wrapping it in a clean dishtowel. "Jordan used the last real icepack two weeks ago: Mom hasn't gotten around to buying any more," she explained. Jordan is one of Rachel's two little sisters. The other is Sara.

And yes, that is almost my name. We spell it differently, though.

When they had finished their homework Ikell called the Garrisons to have someone pick her up. Within twenty minutes she was gone, and Rachel and I had her room to ourselves. She locked her door as well as the one to the bathroom she shares with Jordan before she sat down

at her desk again.

"What is it?" I asked, still holding the make-shift ice pack to my eye.

"I'm making a list: don't bug me," she muttered. I sat on her bed, waiting.

Finally, she said, "Done." She locked it in one of her desk drawers, then went downstairs for a few moments.

When she came back, I asked, "Now what?"

"Now we wait," she said. "I've called the others for an emergency meeting." She took something out of one of her dresser drawers and opened her window. I heard a _snap_, then she put the thing on a bird feeder hanging just outside her window. I knew then that it was one of those cheap fluorescent glowsticks you can get at a five-and-dime store. You know - the ones where, if you break them, they glow? Well, we had spent a lot of money stocking up on them.

Putting them just outside our windows was our signal to Tobias that, if he was anywhere around, he was wanted A.S.A.P.

"Everybody?" I asked, surprised.

"It's important," she said, flopping down next to me. "I told Cassie to bring Ax along: hopefully this won't take too long."

When Cassie and Ax finally walked through Rachel's door she relocked it, then opened her window to let Tobias in. "Don't bother changing, Tobias," she whispered to him. She unlocked her desk drawer and took out the piece of paper.

"What's that?" Marco asked. "A secret message that'll explode in five seconds?"

"No, but in five seconds I'll shove it down your throat," she retorted angrily.

"Hey, Rachel? Take a deep breath," I advised. "Remember who you're _really_ angry at."

She sighed. "Sorry, Marco. It's just that those creeps got me really unnerved."

"What creeps?" Cassie asked, worried. After we went over the story, she shuddered. "You'd think after all we've been through, we wouldn't have to worry about everyday _bullies_!"

"At least you both kept your heads," Jake said, looking at Rachel. "And neither of you morphed or anything."

"I'm never going to live that down, am I?" Rachel asked him. I had no idea what she meant.

"Terminator 4: Revenge of Ikell," Marco quipped. Nobody laughed, but that might not have been Marco's point. "Why the meeting?"

"Ikell's choice of words got to me," Rachel said quietly. She joined

the rest of us on the floor next to her bed, where we were huddled close to keep our voices down. Tobias lay between her and me. "I have reason to believe she knows about the Yeerks - and knows that Will Ford, Jerome McKinley, and some other kid we don't know are Controllers."

What did she say? Tobias asked.

She looked over her paper, then read it word for word:

"Why she might know about 'stuff':

Phrase 1: 'Get your sorry butts kicked all the way to Otursha IX.'

note: _Otursha IX_.

Phrase 2: '...to go back to whatever dead planet you dared to step off of.'

note: _dead planet_.

Phrase 3: 'I will never join your bleeping kind.'

note: _kind_.

Phrase 4: 'Now go slither back into whatever slime pit you dared to crawl out of...'

note: whole phrase.

Phrase 5: 'Remember to pity all of them but Roger Henley.'

note: whole phrase.

Phrase 6: 'You mustn't get involved with those creeps. It is more dangerous than you could ever imagine. You could lose more than a little blood.'

note: whole phrase.

Phrase 7: 'I wish I could tell you, but you would either think me crazy, or - logic forbid - believe me. If you believed me, you could be put into danger. I cannot allow that.'

note: whole phrase."

"_Logic_ forbid?" Marco sounded doubtful. "That girl's missing more than a _few_ screws."

"She's from a different country: give her some slack if she says things differently," Cassie said gently. We all looked at Ax when she said that.

"I was listening to Ikell, too," I said, "but I didn't think of all those things together. Mind was too busy thinking about my eye, I guess. Good thinking." I kept my own observation to myself: it'd be shared after Rachel was done.

"That is very attractive, Sarah," Marco said. "You should get black

eyes more often." I glared at him through my ice pack.

Rachel shrugged. "I think you can all figure out the connections. I mean, just look at how she referred to where the bullies came from - slime pit on a dead planet. And the choices of crawl and slither. Finally, there's Phrases five, six, and seven - her little speeches after the fight."

Ax frowned. "I have never heard of an Otursha XI. Or of any Otursha system, for that matter."

"Pity all of them _but_ Roger? What's that about?" Marco asked.

"I think she knows that he's clean," I said.

"Or voluntary," Rachel added, nodding.

"And then there's Phrase six itself," Cassie murmured. She sounded disturbed.

"Then what are we going to do about it?" Marco asked. Then he sort of half-grinned. "Maybe she's high on oatmeal."

"I doubt that," Rachel said. "I mean, she's used some weird words, but there haven't been any crazy outbursts."

"Maybe... _it_ died," Cassie suggested. She didn't sound like she believed it. No one asked what _it_ was.

"I think we should have someone _talk_ to her. That would prove it," I said.

You mean like this? Tobias put in. He was talking so that only the five of us could hear him. Thought-speech is like E-mail; it only goes to those you want it to, except when you cry out in surprise or for some reason don't think about it.

"Yeah. Her reaction to it would be proof, hands down, whether or not she knows anything." I looked over at Aximili. "What do you think, Ax?"

"It may work," he said. "That is a good plan. I believe that the best way to do it is either to have Tobias fly overhead and call to her, or have me talk to her while in her company."

"What's wrong?" Cassie asked. He had sounded distracted.

Aximili didn't answer right away. "I was just thinking that it would be... nice if Ikell turned out to be an- to be... like me."

Ax hadn't seen any other true Andalite (for more than a few moments) in nearly a year, since he first came to Earth. I realized, not for the first time, that Ax was pretty lonely, stranded on our planet without any other Andalites to share his problem. I'm not saying that we didn't help at all: it's just that it would be so much nicer for him if the closest Andalite was a friend, not Visser Three.

That's right: Visser Three is an Andalite-Controller. Actually, I should say he is _the_ Andalite-Controller, since he is the only one. But Visser Three is also ruthless, merciless, and insane. That,

combined with his morphing ability.... let's just say, you'd be safer jumping off Mount Everest than being with him, and have better chances of surviving. I can't believe how lucky the others have been so far. They _wouldn't_ be so lucky, if they didn't have their morphing ability.

"No chance, Ax," Marco said. "If she can make it through school without consistently stopping somewhere every two hours - which I haven't seen -, there is zero-probability of that."

"I know." He sighed. "It's a nice dream."

"Heck, why would you _want_ her to be?" he pressed on. "We're talking about _Ikell_, right? _The_ Ikell?"

Rachel punched him in the arm. For real. "Would you just shut up?" she cried. "Leave her alone!"

"Marco, please - Ikell has every right to be... odd, after what she's been through. Rachel, Marco's just trying to get your goat. He'll lay off if you just ignore him." Cassie, despite her scolding words, wore a faint smile.

"Says who?" Marco quipped, then put his arms over his face as if to ward Rachel off. She took Cassie's advice and ignored him.

But I knew Marco better. So did Cassie and Jake. He was trying to make Aximili forget that he was lonely, and a glance at the alien told me that it had worked, for now. I can't imagine how Aximili must feel while the four of them are in school, I'm with the Chee, and Tobias is flying around the neighborhood, hunting up his next meal.

I know it sounds selfish, but I'm glad it didn't happen to me. I hope nothing like it ever does.

But I also hope the Andalites get here soon. It's getting harder and harder to keep the others' identities secret from the Yeerks, and myself hidden away with only brief excursions in my normal form. I know we're all getting more and more paranoid.

If only we had ourselves an _orba_....

*

It was until later that I realized I'd forgotten to share my observation.

Ikell had called Edward's buddies _rif'grat_.

A nonsense word? Possibly.

But it was awfully close to _rihgrac_.

Rihgrac is a Hork-Bajir word for "waste product".

Let me ask you this....

Do _you_ think it was a coincidence?

CHAPTER 18

Not long after, something... odd... happened.

There is no better way to describe it.

It wasn't that the Chee had put me on some sort of drug that suppressed memories in various parts of my cerebrum - although that did happen. There was one day I completely forgot how to talk - English, and any other language for that matter, was gibberish - that was an extremely unnerving day: I spent the entire thing laying on my bed, staring at the ceiling. There was another where years of reading and writing were temporarily erased: that day I spent watching TV. In another one, I started writing with the hand I don't usually write with and, when I realized what was going on, I tried writing normally and couldn't. Just couldn't. Needless to say, I was confined to my room for over a week while the Chee tried to pin down where the memory of Udrak's goodbye was stored.

But, as I said, that isn't what was odd about it. It helped make it odder, but it wasn't the primary oddness.

Three days after the black-eye incident, Ikell was out of the others' classes, and moved up to the high school level. She and Jake still had their tutoring secessions, though, and his grades were supposedly climbing back up ever so slowly. Their meeting that Wednesday was the date we decided to do the experiment. Jake's parents were going out to some function or another, and Tom was going to an early Sharing meeting, one of many that had been happening lately. Of course, he didn't tell Jake anything about why he'd been going to all these meetings, though he did tell him that he'd seen Ikell - "That chick with the bright red hair? Yeah, I've seen her. Strange kid," were his exact words, according to Jake - but from what we understood, she wasn't a major - i.e. Controller - member, but only a once-in-a-while, ordinary-but-uninvolved, not-quite member.

Anyway, all it meant to me was that Ikell and Jake would be alone when they met at 4:30 at Jake's house.

Almost.

Jake took Cassie's bus home to get Aximili. They took a public bus over to Jake's house. At 4:00 Aximili acquired Jake's dog, Homer, and the real Homer was put in Jake's backyard. Half an hour later Aximili morphed in Jake's bathroom.

At six-thirty, when Aximili had to demorph, Ikell still hadn't shown. Jake called the Garrison's house. "I'm sorry, Jake," Mrs. Garrison told him. "I haven't seen Ikell all day. She's a rather odd girl, isn't she?" Jake admitted that she was, laughed, then hung up.

Six days later, Ikell still hadn't reappeared. Search parties had given up. Her face was on posters that were pasted all over town.

She was gone.

But where?

CHAPTER 19

I lay on my back on my bed. I'd been doing that most of the week.

But this time was different.

"There may be some minor discomfort," Mia told me.

"We don't really know," Veedric explained in his blunt manner. "It might also hurt a lot. We are praying it doesn't."

"Thanks a lot, Bri," I said with a weak smile. Veedric prefers being called "Brian", a human name he's taken a liking to.

He smiled faintly with his muzzled face. Veedric is one of the few Chee with a definite difference in design: his muzzle, instead of being straight, short, and smooth, is short and jowled, sort of like a basset hound's. It gives him a slightly doofy look. He's able to shift his "jowls" up, though, in an extremely good grin. He patted my shoulder. "Luck be with you, Case."

Case. That's what Veedric calls me, for whatever reason he has. But, since he's so patient about tutoring me, and makes it so much fun, I let him.

"Let's do it," Erek said. His tone had none of the ecstatic energy that Rachel's did when she said that phrase. He sounded like the officer who orders the guy to throw the switch on the electric chair.

I forced my hands to remain flat at my sides, so I didn't dig my fingernails into my palms or massage my left hand with my right. I didn't want to look any more nervous than the others already knew I was. "Let's do it," I agreed, like the man refusing a last wish at the firing squad.

Was I nervous? _Ooh_ yeah.

Veedric injected my ar-

-it was dark. A great nothingness broken only by the throb of a heartbeat.

-

The center of myself. The hidden corner of my mind I could withdraw to. I recognized this.

To a Controller, it was their prison cell.

To me, it was my retreat.

I felt a presence, not really there.... a memory. A ghost. An answering machine message playing. Some mixture of the three.

The words began. Words in Udrak's soundless voice.

Sarah, I am truly sorry not to have said this in life. But that could not be helped. I saw something, a form. I squinted at it, and was shocked as it took on a shape. As it became me.

Me, with no eyes, no mouth, no nose. No face.

Me, with no arms.

Me, with my legs glued together to form a tail.

Me, with two short antennae protruding from my forehead.

.... was that how Udrak saw himself?

—

_ I wouldn't know what to say then. That's why I composed this. Hopefully, when you access this, you'll have finished grieving for me. I don't want you to miss me, Sarah. The faceless version of myself seemed to smile slightly, just a small upturn of the nonexistent mouth. Udrak's tone became drier, the kind of tone he used to use to tell a joke. Little girl, why should you mourn your enemy? But you do, each time they die, my dearest.... and for your sake I hope that you always will. The dry tone was gone. You and I had the rare opportunity to see both sides of this war. It was an opportunity I would not trade for a seat on the Council of Thirteen. My people... yours... no one else, of any race, could understand this war greater than we. For that, I thank you. _

—

I did not interrupt Udrak. I would not. I would see this through.

It did not mean it did not hurt me terribly. I was crying. I was wracked with sobs.

—

_ Udrak had said goodbye._

—

I am glad that in leaving you, you are not left alone. You have Aximili and the Animorphs now. You can't have me anymore, but you have them. So long as you are not alone, Sarah, I know that you will be safe - or, in the very least, as safe as you possibly could be with that bravado of yours. I chuckled amidst my tears. May you never change, dear, dear Sarah. Having others makes it easier for you to let go of me. There is no point of holding onto what you cannot grasp - that I taught you long ago. May you always remember that, and everything else we've learned, both apart and together. Between the two of us - and what we learned when we were one - you are among the wisest creatures alive, dear one. Do not let creatures without our experience convince you otherwise.

I regret not being able to watch you grow up, Sarah. In the part of me where I hid my impossible dreams, my own various nonsenses, there was a dream of being with you as you grew, as you livedâ€¦ but I always knew that it was a silly thing, something I could not show you because it would not be fair to either of us. It would have made it seem plausible. It wasn't. I would have given my life to see it fulfilled... I suppose I did, in a way. You shall survive without me because of me. If I could not remain with you, this alternative is

not without its share of reward. You're on your own, you know what to do. The dry tone returned, and his words were like he was answering a denial of what he had said. Of course you know what you'll do, you idiot - I didn't raise you to show your idiocy! You'll go on without me. You'll survive on your own. I could not reasonably wish for anything more.

I know you, silly girl. You'll go on to spit in the face of your enemies and annoy your allies with your blunt realism and infallible common sense. But I know you'll also accept that this isn't an enemy you can defeat... this enemy taking me. I'm dying. I feel it. It was partly my choice, but I know you'll live with the fact that you can't stop me from doing as I see is best. After seven years, no doubt you've discovered that I can be somewhat single-minded. I smiled, knowing just what he meant. Butâ€¦ He paused, then continued quickly, as if annoyed at himself. But nothing! You're young, Sarah. You'll adapt, learn to live without me. Miss me, perhaps, even if I don't want you to. But you'll live. That is what is most important. What is most saddening, Sarah, is that there is no more 'we'. That I mourn. But I ask that you do not. I shall always be with you, dear one. Always. What I've done in my lifeâ€¦ I regret none of it, now, Sarah. None. I don't, because it was all for you and only you. Dearest oneâ€¦ you gave me meaning. For that you are the most precious thing I have ever known. I love you, Sarah, more than myself, and as part of myself. He sort of chuckled. Wordsâ€¦ wasted on what they were never meant to expressâ€¦ He sighed shakily. I shall miss these conversations, Sarah. That is, if the good you helped me do lets me into that heaven you pray to so often. Farewell, Sarah. His voice almost cracked, but it didn't, not quite. I cannot say 'goodbye', because that denotes complete separation. But 'farewell' suffices, for it merely wishes you a good journey and good health, both of which I wish you to have. Farewell, Sarah. I felt his pain, the wish to use our tear ducts to cry, the need to keep the wish suppressed. Farewell, dear one. Please, farewellâ€¦

—

A second time, I woke up in tears. A second time, Mia held me close and let me cry.

But this time, they were tears of joy.

Udrak had saidâ€¦ no, not goodbye.

He'd said farewell.

Later that day, I grouped Mia, Erek, and Veedric with me onto the recorder. I took a split second shot of me with my arms over Mia's and Erek's shoulders, with Veedric standing behind us grinning his odd, jowled grin. Just before the picture was taken, Veedric dug his fingers into my ribs. I burst out laughing just as the picture was recorded.

Udrak had said to fare well.

I wasn't going to let him down.

CHAPTER 20

"Hey, Dave. Nice room."

> "Thanks." He straddled the desk chair backwards. The room was cluttered, but not quite messyâ€| yet. It was well on its way, though. I sat on the bed. A snake slithered from a box in the corner and under the bed. I politely ignored it. "Feeling better?"<p>

"Much. You were right. Once the Chee were able to let me access the entire memory, I've been fine."

He looked at me. "Did I ever thank you?"

I looked back, a little startled. "Yeah. Just before I left the first time."

"Oh, yeah." He shook his head. "You know, I didn't really mean it. That 'thanks' meant, 'thanks for spitting in the others' faces, you're on my side'." I hadn't suspected that. He smiled. "But, now... thanks." His smile widened. "_That_ thanks meant, 'thank you for everything'."

"And you're welcome," I replied. "Without you, I'd probably still be having seizures. You've certainly paid your rent this month, Dave."

He looked at me oddly, then laughed. "Whatever," he said, shaking his head. "I was sarcastic the first time, when I said that maybe this wouldn't be so bad."

"I was aware of that."

He gave me that "do-not-interrupt-me" glare. It quickly faded back into the smile. "Now I know it won't."

I sighed. "David... do you remember what I said, why I brought you here?"

"You said you couldn't be an Animor-" He looked at me sharply, eyes narrowed. "You also said the others didn't know!" he snapped.

I tensed, then relaxed. "Bad choice of words then." I waited until he pretended to relax more. "I tried being an Animorph like the others, but you know what? I never will be. They've been together too long to accept me - _completely_ accept me - as one of them. And I couldn't pretend to be one of them. I'd always be apart." I thought about what I was trying to say for a moment. "But I wanted to accept _myself_ as an Animorph. Can you understand that?" He didn't say anything. "I had to prove to myself that I could do it. That I could make the life-or-death decisions. That I could live with doing something that could possibly destroy us all. That I could keep an important secret from anyone I might care about."

"You're never going to tell the others, are you."

"Not while I live, or while the war continues," I replied. "When either of those things have come true, though, I think it'll be safe to let the- to tell."

"You were going to say 'let the rat out of the box', weren't you?"

"Something like that," I admitted.

He shook his head, scowling a little. "Thanks for not doing it."

"Sure thing."

"But how will you tell the others if you're dead?"

I looked at him. "A friend gave me an idea."

*

I stood on the middle of the recording device, and adjusted the collar of my wetsuit yet again. This was getting really, really redundant. How many times had Udrak redone his? I bit my lip, then said, "Record."

There was a tiny beep as the computer complied.

I smiled, slightly crookedly. "Hello everyone and anyone who is seeing this," I said. "Either I've died, or someone is going to get into serious trouble." I cringed slightly, lowering my head to curse myself inwardly, but chose not to restart. I looked up again. "I know that this really should be serious, but understand, this is at least the dozenth time I've started over and it's getting so old I'm starting to think that, after all this work, I'm never going to die. But I'm not stupid, so I'll shut up about that."

"I'm calling this a living will....."

**_

â€| catch the conclusion (or is it the conclusion?â€|) in The Freaks!

_**

End
file.